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The Brothers' Bet; or, Within Six Weeks.

BY EMILIE FLYGARE CARLEN.

CHAPTER I.

THE BROTHERS.

DURING the warmest hours of a scorching afternoon in July of the year 18—, two young men had sought the cool shelter of a mountain grotto on the beach, where, as little boys, they used to consign to the waves their tiny boats, rigged from the bark of trees.

The young men were brothers; they had lately returned home to pass their summer holidays in the society of a beloved mother.

The elder of the two, Edwin Wallenberg, who, about six months before, had entered upon his duties as rector in a provincial town not far distant, had already attained the haven of his hopes in a professional point of view; while Victor, who was in the law, and was still obliged to place "assistant" before his title of District Judge, was to all appearances, very far from any haven.

The evening was approaching. The dry fog which had long prevented the surrounding objects from coming out in their true lights, began gradually to disperse, and a bright blue sky shone over a bright blue lake, confined, as it were, by a belt of tall gentle-waving rushes, whose variegated green contrasted charmingly against the white sand of the beach. And against the white sand again contrasted the dark fragments of rock, amid which our young friends had sought their Viking's cave.

"Reach that to me, Victor; you sleepy fellow, do you not see that I want to light my cigar?"

With these words the young rector raised himself upon one arm, and stretched out his hand toward the match-box.

"Now, which of us has shown himself the most sleepy?" answered Victor, as he smilingly handed his brother the match-box in question. "I, who have preserved the sacred fire, or you, who have permitted it to be extinguished?"

"Eh, what? Do not disturb me—I am meditating. I am enjoying at this moment quite a spiritual life—the delicious life of the gods. This diminutive mossy bank, and this pillow of true northern grey-stone, represent to me the heavenly kingdom, while the soft noise of the water, rolling between the pebbles, sounds to my ears like the music of the seraphs."

"And I would willingly sacrifice a third of my prospects of advancement within the next two years, if we were only so fortunate as to hear another kind of music. Is it not about this hour that your mysterious beauty leaves her living tomb, to breathe forth her sorrow in music?"

"Bah!"

"I am confoundedly curious!"

"Bah!"

"It is very well for you to say 'bah'—you who are already in the kingdom of heaven. But I—this cliff is rather too short for a couch—the deuce, the moment I move, I crack my skull. There are certain little inconveniences which destroy all chances of obtaining comfort upon a true northern pillow!"

"Every comfort has its hidden discomfort. If you were a philosopher you need not have slept upon a grey-stone to have gained that piece of knowledge—however, you read little or nothing."

"On the contrary, I am at present on the best road to improve myself."

"Ah—ah! You are studying philosophy?"

"Rightly guessed."

"So you are reading Hegel?"

"Pooh!"

"Schelling, then?"

"Pooh!"

"Or, perhaps, one of our Swedish philosophers?"

"I am studying Paul de Kock."

"Charming philosophy, upon my word. I wish I had my riding-whip here, I would teach you what it was to jest with such an important personage as the rector, Mr. Wallenberg."

"Well, let us make peace, and return to our widow, Maria Elenora the second."

"Very good."

"Which of us two shall take upon himself to console her?"

"Of course I must, as I am a clergyman. The only time I saw her in church inspired me with abundant inclination to set about it at once."

"I don't doubt it, seeing that I, who have never yet beheld her, feel that it is incumbent on me to fulfill the same duty. I should not be surprised if she did not rather require legal assistance."

"They say she has inherited no lawsuit from her husband."

"Has she then inherited anything from him?"

"Nothing, as far as I know, with the exception of this property here; where, they say, she shuts herself up in a room, hung with black, and gives way to the most frantic grief."

"And yet her widowhood has already lasted eight months."

"Well, and so you are of the opinion that a spiritual comforter—"

"No—no; there is no doubt that the sweet angel is in far greater need of a worldly one. But tell me, has she never been seen except at church, and during these mysterious sails on the lake?"

"Never!"

"And does she always steer her course toward the lonely Hazel Islands?"

"Not always, but very frequently. She has an object of interest there."

"For her heart?"

"It is a charitable object. The three or four fishermen and their families, who inhabit the Hazel Islands, are almost as good as severed from the rest of the world; hence she has double merit in seeking these poor people, who have not the means of going to market themselves."



"YOU WILL DO ME A FAVOR, MR. WALLENBERG," SAID THE CHARMING WIDOW, "BY NOT REPEATING THIS VISIT TO ME."

"Faith, if that be a merit, it might serve as an example; in which case—"

"That won't do! Yours would be a suspicious kind of charity. Plainly speaking it would be spying."

"Something like it, it must be confessed. If we are going to act, above all things let us act chivalrously, then—"

"Hush, hush! By heavens I fancy I hear the strokes of an oar. What a piece of luck if this should happen to be one of the evenings that—"

Instead of answering, Victor jumped up, and hastened out upon the plateau, which was immediately before the mouth of the mountain grotto.

"You imprudent fellow!" exclaimed Edwin, "can't you understand that if it be her, and she perceives us, there will be no serenade. Here, place yourself behind this tree, then we shall see through a sort of jealousy."

"All right, it is famous here; but I shall be frantic if our heroine take us for fools."

"Or if we take ourselves for fools," answered the rector, laughing.

* * * * *

The strokes of the oar came nearer and nearer, but as the promontory prevented the two gentlemen from seeing what was on the other side, they were forced to curb their eagerness for a few minutes. During these minutes, in which their mutual impatience vented itself differently, according to their respective dispositions, we will devote a few words to the description of them.

The rector, who had retained an unshaken calmness in his demeanor, notwithstanding that in his countenance curiosity was distinctly to be read—was a small, fair man, with handsome, agreeable features. His blue eyes reflected a thoughtful spirit, gifted with serious rather than lively ideas, but the somewhat protruding upper lip, shaded with a yellowish, silky-looking mustache, had rather a stubborn cast, which proved that the young man was not so thoroughly flexible and yielding as—by the first glance at his more effeminate than manly countenance—one would have been apt to fancy.

Victor was a head taller than his brother, but did not possess that perfect elegance of figure which was to be observed in each movement of the rector; on the other hand, in mind and body, he was full of life, activity, and manliness. He was of a darker complexion than Edwin, and had bright eyes, which sparkled with gaiety. His brow—except when constant work at times wrinkled it—was as smooth as ivory, and contrasted well with the long, dark, auburn-colored hair, which nature had curled with much greater taste than the artificial locks of the rector.

Also, in Victor's open countenance, goodness was the principal expression; but an eye which was accustomed to penetrate the surface, would have found in his physiognomy a considerable amount of self-love, as well as the traces of more violence than solidity of feeling.

He could scarcely stand still a second, and in his joy and surprise had almost exclaimed aloud, when the long-expected boat at length doubled the point, and a charming vision presented itself to their eyes.

It was quite a fairy skiff, rowed by a young boy, who seemed to be permitted to steer just where he pleased.

The bark contained also another person, a word of command from whose mouth would have been most becoming; but this person, a lovely young woman, dressed in black from head to foot, sat immovable at the stern of the boat, gazing down into the water, which faithfully reflected her graceful image.

It would be difficult to find a more charming creature than this fair young widow, whose heart, it was said, was totally crushed by despair. Her lovely light brown eyes appeared to indicate a soul already wedded to Heaven, and the earthly dwelling of this pure spirit seemed to be formed entirely of ethereal material.

"Now, have I said too much?" asked the rector, as he pointed to the boat. "To judge from this sublime, sorrowful countenance, may we not believe the report which has been circulated?"

"What report?" inquired Victor, without withdrawing his gaze from the captivating form.

"That she, like the consort of Gustavus Adolphus, preserves the heart of her deceased husband; she keeps it, they say, embalmed in a locked silver casket."

"Ah, a second Maria Elenora. Upon my honor, this name suits her! But I hope that she will not continue this hallucination longer than may befit such a lovely young woman. The consort of Gustavus Adolphus could never have found his equal. But with respect to this pretty little widow here, it would be doing fate an injustice to doubt her good star. Are there not dozens of husbands such as hers was?"

"I know nothing about him; but since she grieves so intensely for him, it is of very little consequence to what class he belonged. The main point is, that he governs her as much in death as he did in life."

"To think that so charming a woman should be wearing herself out by such inconsolable grief. Has no one ever made an attempt to console her?"

"How should such an idea occur to any one in a neighborhood like this, which can not boast of one single passable—scarcely presentable—male creature. But, look, what is that she had under her shawl? A guitar!"

"Yes, it is indeed. Ah, she brings it forth—enchantress, if you only knew that you had other audience besides the mountains and the waves—"

"Let us see if—"

"Will you be silent?"

"Hush!"

CHAPTER II.

WITHIN SIX WEEKS.

Just as the boat came opposite the plateau, the young widow drew off her black gloves, and her snowy white fingers wandered over the strings of the guitar, in sad, touching chords.

Then she ran her large, melancholy eyes along the banks, and as no human being was to be seen, she opened her beautiful coral lips, and sang, in a full and melodious voice, some verses of a pathetic old ballad, in which the lover tries to forget, in poetry, the grief into which the faithlessness and desertion of her beloved have plunged her.

Long after the boat had disappeared, and the song had died away, in their mind's eye the young men saw a mass of fair ringlets peeping from beneath a black lace bonnet, and their ears retained as long the tones of this tender lament.

"I will try if I can find an opportunity of speaking to her," said the rector, with emotion.

"I am firmly determined to see her and to speak to her," cried Victor, impetuously. "And," he added, with unblushing confidence, "I will win her, for though I have beheld her but ten minutes, I am in love with her; not like a fool, as they say in the language of the present day, but as a knight of the times of yore, who would have fought with a dragon in order to have gained the treasure which he guarded."

"Very grand, but softly, softly, I am not exactly a dragon yet."

"Nonsense," exclaimed Victor, interrupting his brother. "With all your philosophy and phlegmatic godliness it is not possible for you to comprehend love of this description. Besides, you must be aware, if we were rivals, that—"

"You are as vain as ever. But I have also my vanity, and let me tell you I see no reason why it should knock under."

"You can do just as you please with your feelings, they obey you, and you govern them as yourself, according to forms and reason; but I cannot govern mine, and I declare to you that this woman with whom you yourself have but just filled my imagination, quickly though she has taken possession of it, will remain forever in my heart."

"But," replied the rector, "suppose I also thought of taking the trouble to win this mysterious widow; how can you fancy that I would give in without a struggle? No, no, my dear Victor, your boldness amuses me, and provokes me to cut you out."

"Well, then, let each of us try for himself."

"So be it; we start on equal grounds. Let me see, I have very nearly two months before me."

"But I have not more than two weeks; the affair must be decided within that time," said Victor.

Edwin smiled dubiously.

"I tell you," continued his brother, "it *must* be decided. Shall we bet? Before six weeks are at an end this enchanting being shall have determined to live for—"

"For you?"

"Yes, for me."

"You will lose, and I shall do my best to prove it to you."

"Do what you please. A voice within me whispers to me to be comforted. She will not resist me, because Cupid himself will incline her toward me."

The rector smiled again in the same quiet, compassionate manner, which is so exasperating to sanguine dispositions.

"Oh, how I hate that smile of yours!" cried Victor. "It is a kind of poisoned weapon, which your stolid, prosaic persons make use of merely to have the pleasure of wounding and annoying others."

"You are becoming quite foolish, dear Victor; it is absurd to think of betting upon the possession of a woman of whom you know literally nothing."

"Do I know nothing of her?"

"Almost as good as nothing."

"I know enough to awaken a lively feeling in her favor."

"Ah, indeed."

"She is as beautiful as the most lovely of God's angels."

"Whom you have seen, I presume?"

"Pure and sacred as the sigh of devotion which the artist consecrated to the Madonna of his dreams."

"Ah, now you are going on capitally."

"She suffers, she is unhappy, and she weeps; charming creature, alone with your grief and your recollections, should you be left to pine forever?"

"But have the goodness not to forget that she wishes to be alone with her grief and her recollections, that she has escaped from the city, from friends, from sympathy, to hide herself in this out-of-the-way corner, which, during the life-time of her husband, she never visited."

"That she does so is a further proof of her worth. But no sorrow can last forever, and it is time that this one were moderated."

"Well, let it be as you wish! You fix six weeks, I say two months; and if at the end of your period there appears to be any chance of your succeeding, I will willingly give up my pretensions. If, on the contrary, at the close of the six weeks, you have progressed no farther than I, then *you* must give up all claims, and leave the field to me."

"*A la bonne heure*, I am contented."

Victor held out his hand, and the rector clasped it. And between them thus the matter was settled.

CHAPTER III.

AT HOME.

AN hour later the two brothers entered their mother's house.

Mrs. Gertrude Wallenburg, the widow of a landed proprietor, who had left her a comfortable little fortune, was a lady who certainly could lay claims to being nothing more than a good-hearted, sensible woman, and a most excellent mother.

Through her care and management her sons had received a superior education, and if by her exertions she could now have procured for each a rich and beautiful wife, she would have been only too glad.

"Do you know what piece of news I have heard, my dear boys?" she said, as soon as she perceived the two young men.

"That rye has risen in price, I suppose, dear mother," answered the rector, as he gayly drew his mother's hand from her sewing, and folded it in his own.

"Oh, no, my thoughts are far from my rye at present; besides, Tonere has not yet come back from the town."

"Well, then, what may it be?"

"You must know that the widow, the lady who lives at Tysselvik, yonder—but gracious! my dear Victor," exclaimed the worthy dame, interrupting herself, "you look so red, and so strange, I verily believe you have got the fever."

"Yes, dear mother, he looks very ill, does he not?" said Edwin, ill-naturedly. "But do not be afraid, it is merely the heat which has sent the blood mounting to his head."

"My dear, kind mother, do not listen to this nonsense. I am not unwell, but I shall become so from curiosity if you do not immediately tell me all you know about the widow."

"That kind of curiosity does not hurt the health, my child," said Mrs. Wallenberg, smiling, as, with maternal pride, she gazed from one son to the other. "Are you not curious too, Edwin?" she added.

"Oh, I shall be most happy to hear a little piece of gossip, for nothing you would tell could be ill-naturedly meant."

"Well, then, you shall hear. Mrs. Norlin, of Kumlaby, was here this afternoon, she had the whole affair from the fountain-head itself."

"The whole affair!" repeated the young men.

"Yes, Mrs. Norlin's aunt has a cousin residing in C—Koping."

"Dear mother, in Heaven's name pass over every thing that does not refer to the subject in question."

"Very well, you impatient creatures, I will not beautify my story in the least. In plain language, then, our beautiful little widow was forced, for the sake of his pitiful gold, to marry a certain Bendelvik, a man in business, who, however, possessed large properties in different parts of the country, but the day on which she was led to the altar she nearly lost her reason."

"Ah, ah!" said Victor, as he and his brother exchanged a significant look. "So she also stands in the romantic light of a sacrifice; it is to be hoped that it won't come out at last that it is a lover, and not a husband that she is lamenting."

"No, no," cried the mother eagerly, "her grief is really for her husband."

"Is that certain?"

"Perfectly so. They were married four years; in the first two years their behavior was so cold toward each other that every one wondered how they could bear such an existence, but in the third year, without any one being able to discover the cause, a great change took place. The lady was like a transformed person, so also the gentleman; tenderness and friendship grew up between them, and this happy state of affairs lasted until his death."

"What then happened?" asked Victor.

"Then—I have this from the same source—her grief at his loss had nearly caused her a severe illness, and in order to escape the vain consolation of her friends, she withdrew here, to this secluded spot, where, if you, my children,

had not by chance come, she would not have seen a single male being."

"Yes, but what is the good of seeing presentable male beings, if she obstinately persists in her sorrow?" suggested Edwin. "It is now nearly eight or nine months since she became a widow."

"She might be allowed to mourn a year."

"But what of her lover?"

"About twelve months after she became a wife," continued Mrs. Wallenberg, "he engaged himself to another girl, and is doubtless long since married."

"What a despicable fellow to be able to forget such a splendid woman!" murmured Victor.

"You speak as if you had seen her," said the mother; "have you done so?"

"This afternoon for the first time."

"Did she also see you?"

"No, she saw neither of us. Edwin and I were together; but Edwin, who always comes in for every piece of luck, has seen her also in church!"

"Very true: we sat opposite to her, and she twice fixed her eyes upon him."

"Doubtless mere chance," muttered Victor, unintentionally betraying his annoyance, as he left the room.

"Victor already regards you with some bitterness. Avoid rivalry, my children, it produces evil consequences."

"Oh, no, mother, not with our peaceful dispositions—but to which of us two would you give your best wishes?"

"To neither."

"How so?"

"If you both wish the same thing, which both could not obtain, I should wish that you were both obliged to give it up. I could not bring my heart to see the one suffer for the other."

"You decide as a good mother ought to decide; however, I think that we shall not trouble you much about making a choice."

CHAPTER IV.

THE FIRST STRUGGLE.

"I SAY, in the onset, shall we commence operations in common, or do you consider it best each to act for himself?" With these words Edwin entered his brother's room, which adjoined his own, but, having arrived before the bed, and finding it vacant, he made a face which evidently meant:

"Ah, well, the question is already decided—good luck to you, poor Simpleton!"

The rector then returned to his chamber, lighted a cigar, and began to ponder over the folly of the bet they had made. This, however, only had the effect of exciting him to meditate farther how he should set about to gain an advantage over his brother in this very affair. It was a matter that deserved serious consideration.

* * * * *

Victor, who could seldom be accused of wasting much of his time in reflections, ("what was the use," he said, "of fatiguing one's self unnecessarily,") had been roaming about the lanes and by-ways ever since sunrise. But it must be remarked that these lanes and by-ways did not skirt his mother's property; no, they were in the immediate vicinity of the ugly, solitary, almost gloomy Tysselvik, which was situated about half a Swedish mile from the pretty little estate, Elfheim, that belonged to Mrs. Wallenberg.

The dwelling-house on Tysselvik was very bad; its unfriendly aspect was not even relieved by a few gay shrubs. Every thing was cold-looking and dried up; the forest had been cut down, the garden was covered with weeds, and the only thing that gave the place a little life was a saw-mill, the sound of which died away among the rocks that extended even thus far from the unfruitful shore.

"How is it possible that she can live here?" said Victor to himself. "A stormy autumn evening would cost her her life."

He walked on further, stood still, then turned round.

"It would be confoundedly unlucky if I were seen; a person is exposed to view here from north, south, east and west. What an infernal spot for adventures of this sort! There is not a thing to suggest an appropriate subject for conversation."

He leaned against a leafless, withered birch-tree, and kept his eyes fixed upon the gloomy dwelling house, which contained his angel of light. At length he heard a rustling behind him. He started, and his vivid imagination had planned a whole chapter of his intended romance, before he could summon up courage to turn round. When, at length, he did venture to do so, he blushed scarlet in scorn at his own stupid fancy.

It was only a little village boy, who was ravenously devouring a large piece of rye bread.

"Does the bread taste good, youngster?" asked the young man, as he contemplated the lad's joyous eyes, and the relish with which he seemed to be eating it.

"Are you hungry, sir?" inquired the boy.

"I can not exactly say that I am; but supposing I were, would you be willing to share your bread with me?"

"Yes, sir, I'd spare you a little, a very little. If I am good, mother says, I shall go to heaven; and the beautiful lady up yonder says I shall be good if I give a portion of what I have to him who is more hungry than myself."

"Ye powers above," thought Victor, "here I have almost of itself the first threads to my future love affair; it merely depends now upon my keeping hold of them, and cleverly making use of them."

"You are an excellent lad for remembering your mother's exhortations so well; no doubt you will go to heaven, even for your good intentions."

"Do you think so, sir?"

With an excusable instinct the boy drew the delicious bread nearer to himself.

"Yes, certainly; the parson will tell you, when you go to him for instruction, that the intention is as good as the act itself."

"Since I have had *one* good intention to-day, I will just take the road home across Sundsmo, or else I shall meet little Peter, who is always hungry."

Victor smiled at the boy's quick appropriation of the idea he had suggested, but as he could not reconcile it to his conscience to inculcate Jesuitical feelings into the youthful mind of his future beloved *protege*, he hastily added:

"Those children are undoubtedly more sure of heaven who seek out others more hungry than themselves, and, unasked, share what they have with them."

"Yes, but little Peter eats such an enormous quantity. I should so like to bring mother a piece home."

"Look here!" Victor drew forth a shining silver dollar. "What if you brought your mother this piece of money, eh?"

The boy's eyes sparkled, as he exclaimed, "No wonder you were not hungry, sir!"

"Still, if I meet the pretty lady, to whom this estate belongs, I will tell her that you offered me some of your bread."

"Will you really, sir?"

"Certainly, I will. Did you get that slice of bread to-day?"

"Just now, sir."

"Were you at the house, yonder?"

"No, the lady came past here."

"Ah; she went past? And has she returned?"

"Oh no, she has not come back yet, she had a great deal more in the basket which she was carrying over her arm."

Victor trembled for joy.

She must return; he had a chance of seeing her quite

close. He felt very much tempted to bring forth another dollar, notwithstanding his purse was not overabundantly stocked. Happily the temptation did not last long; the boy had already jumped up, and ran off quickly to tell his mother what a piece of luck he had had.

Meanwhile Victor was trying to think of a plan by which he might excuse his boldness for trespassing on a stranger's property.

A thousand ideas rushed through his mind; but, of course, none satisfactory to himself. A person could not well lose his way a mile and a half from his own home, nor could he pretend that he had fallen and broken his arm or leg when he was quietly walking, and to be shooting without a gun was quite as impossible, particularly upon another's property.

"Ah, dear me, how stupid I am!" at length he cried; "I will be going to the mill, I have something to order for my mother—the deuce, the mill lies in another direction, and *her* road is this, and this alone—it won't do! I have it at last—I am a botanist—a botanist with all my heart and soul; and I have been told—no, I recollect from my childhood, that in this neighborhood a very rare plant flourishes, no matter what; at this moment, I do declare, I cannot remember a single Latin name!—never mind, it is much more polite to express one's self in pure Swedish."

And forthwith he began, with the utmost eagerness and care, to seek under the bushes and stones, while in thought he continued his monologue.

"Ah, so it goes with the man who possesses a proper confidence in himself. Fortune is never unfavorable to the bold. While you, good brother, are asleep or pondering, I am forging the first wheel of my happiness!—and, by Jove, I believe that my skill is now about to be put to the test! Are those not her seraph feet which are pressing the leaves behind me?"

If the young man had answered according to the truth, which he felt, he would have said no! so little did the tripping, and not particularly light, steps which he heard, correspond with those presumptively attributed to seraphs.

"Are you seeking for anything, sir?" asked at that moment a voice which made our lover shudder from head to foot, not from intense joy, but from deadly fright.

Could the enchanting singer have such a harsh, such an every-day organ of speech, to use the mildest expression? And could a lady, who wished to fly the whole world, be capable of thus unceremoniously meeting him more than half way? With a feeling of constraint and annoyance he turned round, but involuntarily uttered an exclamation of pleasure as he beheld before him a very pretty, tall woman, in a deep blue dress, green shawl, and red bonnet, whose whole deportment and behavior harmonized with the bad taste of her attire.

"Have you seen me before?" she asked hastily, and with a self-satisfied air; "since you seem so very pleased at my insignificant presence?"

"Can one not also be pleased with the appearance of a person at first sight?" said Victor, in a tone which was meant to be flattering, although most probably he immediately began to feel symptoms of ill-humor at the miserable failure of the plans upon which he had so prided himself.

"But tell me, sir, what are you doing in this wilderness?" recommenced the damsel, smiling.

"I am studying botany."

"Ah, indeed; I also know something of that nonsensical botany; but I find it horribly tiresome, for the sake of a few blades of grass, to go poking about in marshes and woods. Have you been long in this neighborhood?"

"Only a few days."

"I can't say the same, to my sorrow; I have dragged out a weary month here already."

"Ah, so you are a stranger?"

"Yes, the Lord be thanked! that is some consolation!"

"You are merely living in this neighborhood for the present, I presume," said Victor.

"Only as long as it pleases me. In such a dismal, wretched place, I certainly won't remain long. One really is buried alive here."

"If I may venture to take such liberty, might I ask to whom I have the pleasure of speaking? My name is Walenberg; my mother lives not far from here."

"Ah, so you are the District Judge," said the young lady, with an extraordinary nod. "I have seen the rector already in church, although I think I was not so fortunate as to attract his attention."

"That can hardly have been the case."

"No, really?"

"But," said Victor, who instantly perceived that, with his fair companion, delicacy would be looked upon as a fault, rather than a virtue, "but you have not yet been pleased to favor me with an answer to the question I made bold to put you."

"Ah, by-the-by, who I am? Well, I am the companion and waiting-maid to the Widow Bendelvik, who has taken it into her head to weep for her husband in retirement."

"Ah—" Victor began, but instantly checked himself.

"I am called Sophie Tolander, Ma'amselle Tolander, of Jonkoping. My father belongs to the court of justice."

"I can not recollect having heard the name there."

"He is the oldest Inspector."

"That is another thing, ma'amselle, then I know him very well."

"Now, that is funny. We may then claim acquaintance with each other."

"How long is it since you have been absent from home, Ma'amselle Tolander, if I may venture to ask?"

"It is little more than a year since I was recommended to Mrs. Bendelvik. I should not have remained with her after her husband's death, if she had not entreated me so earnestly to accompany her here. I am not made of stone, not I, when people appeal to my heart!"

"What admirable feelings! So the young widow is very unhappy?"

"She is quite foolish. But I dare not stop longer at present; this is her hour for coming home. If you will take a walk here to-morrow, perhaps, when I am visiting my lady's poor people, we might meet."

Victor was in despair at the prospect of this unexpected adventure.

Of course, through Ma'amselle Sophie Tolander, he could gain information respecting his future bride; but it might as indubitably come to her knowledge, that he had had a kind of meeting with her waiting-maid, and such a discovery could not possibly tell in his favor. Yet it would not do to offend Ma'amselle Sophie.

"Lord bless me, sir, I declare you are reflecting what answer to give me. Pray do not take the trouble to come if it is not convenient to you. To be sure it is rather tiresome to be always alone, but I have no wish to be intrusive. Good-morning, sir botanist, much luck to you."

"Heigh, ma'amselle, I did not say—"

"Your humble servant," said Ma'amselle Sophie, as she let down her veil, shoved back her bonnet a little, and held her nose grandly in the air.

"I merely wished to remark, ma'amselle, that I have promised my brother to go out shooting with him, but I hope to return in time to profit by so agreeable a meeting."

"As you please, sir; however, by-the-by, it can make no difference to me, for I just remember that to-morrow is one of the evenings that my lady goes out rowing, and on those occasions she is in such a state of feverish excitement the whole day, that I can not leave the house a minute."

In return for this valuable piece of news, Victor lauded Ma'amselle Sophie's kind-heartedness in remaining at home, and assured her that he would not for the world interfere with this amiable feeling. He then bowed gracefully, and hastened away, turning a deaf ear to Ma'amselle

Sophie's fear that she might meet with some mischievous cattle on her road.

"Curse it," muttered the young man, "this thread is snapped far too quickly. The guardian angel of the poor boy was not *my* guardian angel."

CHAPTER V.

THE BROTHERS COMPARE NOTES.

WHEN the young lawyer returned home he expected to find Edwin at breakfast with his mother, but the rector was nowhere to be seen, nor did he make his appearance until the forenoon.

The brothers were scarcely alone, when Victor, with the impatience and eagerness of a child, began telling Edwin what a great start he had got of him.

"How so?" asked the rector, with his usual calmness.

"Hear me first, and then ask. To begin with the chambermaid has been the custom pretty nearly since the heathen times."

"But assuredly it would have been better if you had managed to begin with the heroine herself."

Victor, who had commenced in rather a boastful manner, answered somewhat dejectedly:

"Of course, but good fortune does not fall into one's lap without pains and trouble."

"Not with you, perhaps, but with me it does."

"What do you mean?"

"That I have not only seen our widow, but that I have spoken to her, and that I have not only spoken to her, but that I have also held her hand, while she crossed the narrow bridge, which leads over the brook in the woods."

"You abominable fellow, you—but why should I be annoyed? When a person is inventing a story, it is easy enough to embellish. I, on the contrary, who have met with realities, need not embellish."

"If you do not believe my words, let proofs satisfy you. What do you say to this?"

"Ah, you have found a pocket-handkerchief with the name 'Mathilde' marked on it!"

"An excellent pretext, is it not," replied the rector, "to wait upon her to-morrow?"

"No, it is impossible; it is absolutely impossible. Where, when, or how, could you have seen her?"

The rector smiled.

"If," continued Victor, "it really be true, it is beneath you to make use of such a pretext."

"I have to thank my dear philosophy for this good turn."

"Explain yourself."

"I had been lying down reading my 'Heine,' in that part of the wood, you know, where the brook divides our property from the Tysselvik estate, but I had just put aside the volume to seek among the trees a name, which I had once cut in the bark of a birch-tree."

"Ah, I remember all about it; you did it at the time when you were in love with our pretty little cousin Hilda."

"Whom I have never seen since then. That is a reminiscence of my happy school-days."

"Go on, can't you?"

"Well, I was just standing, wondering at Hilda's and my name being still so fresh-looking, when between the foliage and branches of the trees, I beheld a little black elf gliding along, and—would you believe it—remain presently stationary before my open book?"

"This is enough to drive a man mad. What had you done to deserve such a piece of luck?"

"Console yourself with the old saying, that the goddess of fortune is blind."

"Spare me your hackneyed school phrases. Did she take up the book?"

"Yes, to be sure she did, and she even began to glance

through it, in evident wonder how it had found its way there."

"And, of course, you did not let her wonder long in vain."

"Certainly not, but I did not rush forward, as you, doubtless, in your eagerness would have done. I drew near modestly, and at the same time with a thoughtful air, which spared her all embarrassment."

"We are neighbors, madam," I said, quietly, indeed with indifference rather than eagerness; 'permit me as such to ask, if my library could not assist to while away an hour now and then for you. I have brought some good books with me into the country, of a lighter class than the one yonder, and I shall be delighted to put them at your disposal.'"

"And she condescended to answer your impudence?"

"Impudence, do you call it? She judged my words very differently, for she answered with much grace, and with a voice—the sweetness of which cannot be described:

"I shall have much pleasure in profiting by an offer which has been made to me with so much frankness.'"

"Oh, this is too much, too much!" cried Victor. "I, alas, have not got a single book with me, except—"

"Your beloved Paul de Kock; might you not—"

"Silence; will you be silent, I say! But wait a bit, I shall also find my opportunity!"

"While you are thinking the matter over, I will finish my story, with your permission."

"Yes, let us hear the end of it."

"If you will allow me to send you a list of the works I have at your command—observe, I said *send*—you can then mark those works which you care to read."

"That will not be necessary," she answered, 'I leave the choice to you, Mr. Wallenberg.'"

"Mr. Wallenberg—I now distinctly perceive that you are romancing."

"Not a word of untruth have I spoken; she wished to show, in a delicate manner, that she knew me."

"And it was a want of politeness on your part to force her to this delicacy, by not presenting yourself. Well, and has she consented to your paying her a visit?"

"She said nothing further than what I have told you, and the last sentence she uttered as she bowed adieu, and stepped toward the bridge."

"And fate threw this opportunity in your way!"

"Good-breeding demanded that I should hasten forward and assist her across. Accordingly, in the most quiet, unassuming manner, I offered her my hand."

"Now for the history of the pocket-handkerchief."

"Which is simple, that she left it lying by the book. And if I had run after her with it, it would have appeared very like intrusion."

Victor answered nothing; his good-temper had flown, and although he would willingly have asked his brother a thousand questions about her appearance and her manners, he did not ask him one.

"It was evident that Edwin would have been charmed to have related all the particulars which were connected with his little adventure, but Victor, even though he was punishing himself, was comforted that Edwin had not an opportunity of boasting further of his success."

But we will now leave the brothers, and next pay the young widow herself a visit.

CHAPTER VI.

A WIDOW'S SORROW.

IN a large room, not hung with black, it is true, but with dark hangings and drawn curtains, sat the mistress of Tysselvik, leaning against the carved back of an old ebony arm chair.

The young lady, who, as we are aware, was called Mathilde, was, on nearer inspection, very lovely indeed,

and the expression of suffering, or rather a painful longing which pervaded her countenance, lent to each feature a peculiar interest; still one could not behold this intellectual face, without wishing that its shade of anxious sadness might be removed.

Mathilde was not occupied with a piece of elegant embroidery, or any light work which might have diverted her thoughts. One hand played mechanically with the tassels at the arm of the chair; the other grasped an antiquated-looking gold heart covered with quaint figures, the upper part forming the lock to the lower.

Perhaps it was this ornamental heart which the gossips had honored with the name of her husband's heart.

But whether Mathilde had grieved, or still grieved little or much, this heart, at least, appeared to be a trinket of the highest worth to her, for she carried it to her lips over and over with almost passionate vehemence, and soon her tears began to fall upon its dim flowers and leaves.

But not content with giving this proof of tenderness to the outer treasure, she presently opened the heart, and took a lock of light hair out of it, which, without doubt, was her most bitter and her most cherished remembrance, for now the young wife's tears increased to passionate sobbing, that did not cease until the door of the ante-chamber was softly opened, when instantly the hair was returned to its locket, and the heart itself was deposited in a little silver box.

It was Ma'amselle Sophie whose entry had disturbed her mistress's solitude.

"My gracious, how strange it is that you can endure to weep so long!" exclaimed Sophie.

Mathilde seemed to pay no attention to the interruption.

"If I cry only half an hour," Sophie continued, "I am perfectly miserable, and look frightful; but you, madame, might weep the whole day, and still be as beautiful as ever."

"Sophie," said the young widow, in a tone which stopped all further flattery, "I think you would do well to remember what I have told you."

"Lor, ma'am, I am quite aware that you will not listen to a single word of truth from such an insignificant individual as I am considered to be; nor would it be of any particular consequence how one looked in this dreary wilderness, if it were not now a little less solitary than it was when we first came into this neighborhood."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing more than that there are actually human beings here."

"So there always have been."

"To be sure, but only of a certain class."

"And now?"

"Now, a new sort has come. Yesterday morning I met a young man, who is so handsome, oh, so handsome, that he exactly resembled a sugar-angel. Madame has doubtless seen such angels, they are generally exhibited in the confectioners' shops at Christmas-time."

"Is he fair?" asked the young widow, and a faint rose-tint spread over her pale cheeks.

"No, he is as dark as an Italian, and such a pair of eyes he has, you can not imagine how fine they are!"

"I am at a loss to know why you trouble me with all this nonsense—what does it signify to me how a stranger looks?"

"But, madame, I assure you—"

"Be silent, and spare me in future the discoveries you may make."

"My patience! of course I will be silent, and not forget who I am; but I thought it was agreed, ma'am, when you persuaded me to accompany you into this wilderness, that I should be more of a companion than a waiting-maid?"

"And so you shall be when I feel inclined for society; as soon as that time comes, I will tell you."

The mistress made a motion with her hand, and without

venturing to utter another word, Ma'amselle Sophie took her departure.

When Mathilde was again alone, she knelt down upon a black velvet cushion, placed before the sofa. Her eyes were fixed upon a portrait, which was hung above the sofa. It was the likeness of her husband. Had Mathilde been a Catholic, and the picture the image of a saint, she could not have prayed more devoutly than she now appeared to be doing; but whether her prayer was for a speedy reunion with the original of the picture, or whether it referred to another object of interest, we are quite unable to decide. This, however, is certain, that the young widow's tears more resembled convulsive despair, than the quiet, earnest sorrow which consoles itself with the hope of, ere long, rejoining the departed one in heaven.

She was doomed to be again soon disturbed in the outpourings of her grief.

Sophie presented herself once more, and answered her mistress's angry looks with the news that the rector, Mr. Wallenberg, sought her permission to pay her a visit.

First an expression of impatience, which was not particularly flattering to the young rector, and then an expression of contentment passed over Mathilde's lovely countenance. Finally, having regained her composure, she answered,

"Ask the rector to have the goodness to step into the drawing-room, I will be with him immediately."

CHAPTER VII.

COMFORTER NO. I.

TEN minutes later our widow entered the drawing-room, but she had very nearly retreated on beholding a dark-complexioned young man, with sparkling eyes, and confident air, instead of her acquaintance of yesterday, the thoughtful, modest rector.

"Surely my waiting-maid did not hear the right name, or, perhaps, I misunderstood her; I thought that she announced the rector, Mr. Wallenberg."

"She did as she was requested to do. Since his name was so fortunate as to be known to you, I ventured to assume it on presenting myself to you, but I must introduce myself to you as the District Judge, Wallenberg, your old neighbor, and obedient servant."

Mathilde bowed her charming head gravely but gracefully, then she said, as she took a seat:

"Pray be seated, sir, and impart to me your errand! I have only a few minutes at your disposal."

"A few minutes," repeated Victor, *nota bene*, to himself—"may all good spirits stand by me, that I may make some way with this beautiful prize before Edwin comes sailing in to betray me as an impostor."

The true state of the case was as follows: Victor had felt a strong temptation, like Jacob, to rob his brother Esau of his most precious blessing, therefore he had come while the good rector little dreamed of such a trick being played him, to obtain a legitimate right, namely, the right to pay the young widow a visit. Victor's conscience did not trouble him for an instant. He considered that in love, as in any other conflict, every kind of stratagem was allowable.

Meanwhile, it need scarcely be said, that his inward prayer did not hinder his lips from immediately beginning their office, which truly did not consist in silence.

"My errand; I shall have the honor of mentioning it presently. But if I might venture to entreat a favor, it would be that you would grant me ten minutes to speak of something else."

"I fancy, sir," answered Mathilde, in a less cold than melancholy tone of voice, "since you are not a stranger here, that you can not be unacquainted with my position, and I had hoped that it would have inspired every one with sufficient respect to have checked all paltry curiosity."

"Ah, madame, you are too severe. Command me to go, condemn my boldness for presenting myself before you, but do not accuse me of paltry curiosity. That would be an impertinence toward you, and I never could be wanting in the respect in which your sex, your position, and above all, your present unprotected state, would inspire me, and every man of honor."

"Well, there is so much sincerity in your words, that it contradicts your behavior; but to give me a proof—"

"Demand a hundred if you please."

"I shall content myself with one. Have the goodness to leave me, and never to return."

"Never!"

"I live alone, sir, and wish to remain alone as long as I stay here."

"I shall obey. However, I must convince you—I owe it to my honor—that I have not come out of curiosity to see you, for—"

Mathilde's eyes looked inquiringly.

"For I have already had that honor."

The young widow blushed, and cast an uneasy glance at the clock which hung in the room.

"I annoy you, madame; I will resign my place to an enviable individual. There only remains for me now humbly to beg your pardon for my intrusion, and to add. . . but I must not forget that I might again incur your anger by adding another word."

Mathilde turned slightly pale at Victor's allusion to leaving the field open by his departure, and he had scarcely finished speaking when she said, with almost timid emotion:

"Sir, you just now requested ten minutes to speak of something else besides your brother's errand. I grant you these ten minutes."

"Thanks, a thousand thanks!"

Victor, who had been standing all this time, now took a seat, at such a distance, however, from the widow, that even the most ill-natured eyes could have seen nothing to find fault with. Otherwise his manners and whole appearance were more those of a man who wished to confer a favor, than a man who was bent upon gaining an advantage for himself.

"I am waiting, sir."

The lovely Mathilde looked exceedingly interesting.

"What I intended to have added, madame, is this: You are in sorrow, you are alone, and you wish to be so. Well, I have determined, with or without your permission, to come to cheer you. Human beings are seldom so in love with their grief, that in certain moments they may not be influenced by other impressions, and thus diverted. Such a moment is now before you. You are astonished at my boldness in interfering in your affairs. You are wrong to think it boldness—but that is of no consequence, if only you are diverted."

"I must confess that your originality, which one might almost be tempted to designate presumption, really does amuse me; but when I tell you that I can not permit you to continue your endeavors any longer—"

"If you permitted me to continue them, they would lose their worth; they would then become a duty. But I know you will not give such a permission, therefore, all my thoughts and endeavors confine themselves to convincing you that there exists a being who is disinterested enough to believe himself richly rewarded by the knowledge of having been useful to so charming a lady."

"Then you think—"

"That, henceforth, in your solitude, my image will often dwell in your mind, that consequently your thoughts will be partially diverted—quite against your will, of course; but that, again, does not signify, if only your sad hours are somewhat cheered."

"You are exceedingly amiable to take all this trouble for a person totally unknown to you. But, as it is very

unlikely that we shall see each other soon again, I must tell you that—"

"Oh," cried Victor, "I pray you do not profane your lips by making an assertion which is not quite the fact! Do not tell me that when I am gone I shall not occupy your thoughts a single moment!"

"I did not intend to say that; on the contrary, I am sure I shall think of you; but these thoughts, I can assure you, will never assume a romantic form, which doubtless, in secret, you imagine must be the consequence of your introducing yourself here."

"You are a good Christian, madam, I must say, to favor me with this warning before, to my knowledge, I have given you any cause for it," answered our young judge, blushing deeply.

"Yes, I hope I am a good Christian; but, above all, I am a straightforward person. If you choose to rush into an adventure, that is your own affair. I have warned you, and I add, that I shall never consider you in any other light than that of an extremely conceited, presumptuous young man."

"You might, at least, have been pleased to say eccentric!"

"Then, at the expense of truth, I should have been pleased to have chosen a milder and more agreeable expression. You are very peculiar, sir, because, notwithstanding your pretensions to being eccentric, there is not a particle of eccentricity about you."

"Very good, madame, you have a right to look upon me as you please; I have a right to comfort myself with the certainty that you will not forget me."

"The ten minutes," replied Mathilde, "have been prolonged to fifteen, therefore, I beg you to communicate as briefly as possible your real business."

"Ah, to be sure;—my brother's errand."

Just then Ma'amselle Sophie opened the door again and announced:

"The rector, Mr. Wallenberg!"

"What now?" exclaimed Mathilde.

"The devil!" muttered Victor to himself, "down goes my sun now; but still, I think it has done its work tolerably;" while aloud he said, "As Edwin is coming himself, I feel I am *de trop*; I shall therefore take my departure."

And while the rector and his hostess were still exchanging the usual ceremonious bows and salutations, the young lawyer vanished from the scene, without paying the slightest attention to the astonished glances cast at him by those he was leaving behind, more particularly by Mrs. Bendelvik.

CHAPTER VIII.

COMFORTER NO. II.

EDWIN WALLENBERG fixed his soft, thoughtful, deep blue eyes upon the beautiful Mathilde, who cast down hers, and left it to her new guest to begin the conversation himself.

And he began it thus:

"I did not know that my brother had the pleasure of being acquainted with you, madame. If I had been aware of it, I would have begged him to have introduced me, for I can scarcely believe that you remember an acquaintance of yesterday, who is so totally unworthy of your recollection."

"Oh, sir, I have certainly not forgotten your kind promise to provide me with books! What, however, astonishes me is, that you appear to be ignorant of your brother's visit, when he came on an errand from you."

"How—on an errand from me?"

"Yes, certainly."

"There must surely be some mistake," answered the rector, slightly frowning.

"Not the slightest mistake! He even had himself announced by your name."

"Might I ask what was the business with which I entrusted him?"

"He did not get so far as to disclose it," replied Mrs. Bendelvik, "because, as he declared, your entrance rendered it unnecessary."

"I really do not know, dear madame, how I am to exculpate my brother's boldness. The only excuse to be found for it is, I might almost say, the childish frivolity of his character. There is no evil in him, he is a good-natured simpleton, nothing more."

"He is very engaging," answered Mathilde, artlessly: "and he did not utter a word in disparagement of your character."

"I feel the extent of this mild reproof, but even though it should lower me in the eyes of those who do not know me, I must still repeat that my brother is a good-natured simpleton, whom I, however, love too much to be long angry with for the trick he has played me."

"Ah, so he has played you a trick?"

"That he has indeed. I told him of my having accidentally met you, and he repays my confidence by presenting himself to you without my knowledge."

"That is really very disagreeable, and it sincerely grieves me to have been the object of a conversation that—"

"Contained not a single syllable that could displease you in the most remote degree. But, madame, to change the subject, will you permit me to show you a small catalogue of my library?"

"Thank you very much; I shall, as you proposed, mark the names of those works which I should like to read, and then return it to you."

"Which is as much as to say that my brother's inconsiderate behavior falls back upon me. You do not deign to let me hope that I might assist you in your choice, or now and then come, and by conversing about what you have read, enliven your solitude."

"The last is quite impossible."

"Impossible!"

"Yes, because in the first place, on reflection, I think that the visits of a gentleman might give occasion for gossiping."

"What, here in this humdrum neighborhood?" said Edwin.

"You must acknowledge, Mr. Wallenberg, that wherever she may be, it is the duty of every unprotected young woman to be reserved."

"Certainly, but in your situation, madame, there is no necessity for such reserve."

"No matter, my own feelings of what is right must decide for me."

"Say, rather, your aversion to the importunate attentions of a stranger."

Mathilde smiled sadly.

"Believe me, Mr. Wallenberg, I would not even allow an acquaintance to disturb my voluntary solitude."

"Well, but there remains one point yet. You said 'because in the first place;' what is your other reason?"

"It is this: I can positively assure you that your kind intentions will remain unrewarded. I have no wish to change my present mode of life; an ardent desire to continue it thus, gives to my days their only interest. What is it that you wish, therefore?"

"I wish to prove to you that you are not acting rightly. And if you will be so good as to permit me to meet you now and then under the open heavens, during your morning walks, I shall succeed."

"It is even more impossible for me to grant this," persisted Mathilde.

"May I not then cherish the slightest hope of seeing you again?"

"Sir, in conclusion, permit me to say a few words which come from my heart, and you will not surely let me say them in vain."

"Ah, pray speak, command, I feel myself happy to be allowed to obey you."

"It is not a command, but a request I make. Forget me entirely, and neither force on me your attentions, nor yet your annoyance at your attentions being declined."

"To forget you, is, for the present moment, at least, not in my power, but to force any attention upon you, after you have so decidedly forbidden it, is, of course, out of the question."

"I expected this answer, and since I have neither a brother nor a protector, who could thank you for the respect you have shown me, I do so myself most readily and sincerely."

"And I," answered the rector with emotion, "in taking my leave, beg your pardon, madame, for having, misled by a friendly intention, been wanting in that consideration which your position demands."

"Having thus spoken, he bowed low and respectfully, and was already at the door, when Mathilde—in whose handsome countenance might be read a mixture of contentment and annoyance—stepped forward to detain him.

"Mr. Wallenberg, I—that is to say, circumstances have, perhaps, wounded you—in future—" She stopped.

"Ah, so I may hope that—"

"No, no; hope for nothing else but my gratitude. And if you really have respect for a poor widow, then—do not watch her steps."

This was said in a trembling voice, and if possible, with a yet more eloquent gesture.

"Re-assure yourself, madame, he who acts with the openness that I do, could never become a spy."

A deep blush covered Mathilde's cheeks, and spread even to her brow.

"Thanks!" she answered with a bright, charming look.

Edwin felt that this look almost penetrated his heart, but he withdrew without answering farther than by another still lower bow.

For several minutes after the rector had disappeared, the young widow remained standing where she was, with her face buried in her hands.

When she again raised her head, two large tears dimmed her eyes.

"Ah, Father, Father in Heaven," she whispered, "how will all this end? If I could, I would go away immediately—go away immediately? no, no, I talk foolishly. How I suffer," she added softly, as she laid her hand upon her agitated heart. "Day and night this image is before me! My life is absorbed in one single thought, and I am terrified by every thing that might interfere with my fate and avert it. What have I done to these two men that they wish to force their solicitude upon me? They will not be satisfied, at least not the one who, with such unprecedented boldness, wanted to compel me to think of him. Years back, perhaps, he might have succeeded but too well; now, on the contrary, oh, now all romantic adventures are out of the question for me."

But this last sentence had scarcely passed her lips, when her face became again suffused with burning blushes, notwithstanding she was now quite alone. A subdued sigh raised her slight muslin morning-dress. Then she sank into a lounging-chair, and hid her brow against its cushioned side.

"Did you ring, madame?" said Ma'amselle Sophie, at that moment stretching her inquisitive face inside the door.

"Why do you continually intrude upon me without being called?" demanded the tormented mistress, with a look which plainly bespoke her displeasure.

"Good gracious; this is the way I am rewarded for my good intentions!"

"Listen; since you have come in, I have an order to give you."

"An order? Madame did not speak in such severe terms when I received her promise to be her companion."

"May be not, because in those days you did not take liberties which were unbecoming to you."

"Yes, but—"

"Be silent and listen. Once for all, I desire you not to receive either of these Mr. Wallenbergs, unless"—this was added in a drawling, almost angry tone—"unless I change my mind with respect to the solitude which at present best agrees with my wishes."

CHAPTER IX.

EXCHANGE OF LETTERS.

On the following morning our youthful widow received two letters, one of which was quite thin and flexible, and was stuck under the envelope of the other.

The first, from the rector, ran thus:

"DEAR MADAME:—You forbade me yesterday to visit you; I obey. You forbade me to meet you during your walks; I obey. You forbade me to watch your steps in any way; I obey this also.

"But there was one thing which you forgot to include in your commands, namely, that I was not to write to you. Hence I take advantage of this single expedient which you have left open to me.

"In the first place I entreat you most earnestly not to throw aside my letter, unread, and trusting that you will grant my request, I beseech you most humbly to read what I have ventured to write with as much attention as it is possible for you to spare me.

"In all I have seen you four times; in church, during one of your rows on the lake, during a walk in the wood, and lastly, yesterday, in your own house.

"To have seen a woman like you four times, has had the same effect as if I had seen another woman forty times. I love you, madame! Ah, for Heaven's sake do not throw away my letter; you will presently see that this confession was necessary to justify my audacity. For you know love justifies every thing.

"Now, at least, you have a clear explanation of my behavior, and be the consequences what they may, honor forbids me to delay this explanation longer.

"Then let me repeat it again. I love you.

"But it is not a violent, it is not an extravagant, and still less is it a mad love! On the contrary, it is the most respectful, the most patient, and the most yielding love, which ever man could have experienced for so perfect a being as yourself.

"Since I have had the courage to confess this, which may probably damage my cause, as, strange to say, woman is most generally taken by storm, there remains yet for me to add, my respectful devotion, my deep sympathy in every thing that concerns you, are so far removed from selfishness, that during the banishment to which you have condemned me, I suffer less for my own peculiar loss than I do for the consequences to you.

"This may sound conceited, but, believe me, it is not so. Left to yourself, you will permit your grief—which is really unreasonable, since it is carried to such an extreme, totally to consume your life, and the flower of your beauty. I do not mean outward beauty, for the form which God has bestowed upon your spirit is of too exalted a cast to be visibly changed by any thing else than by time; but the flower of your inward beauty, the fresh and noble powers of your youth will decay, and a wasting of the mind will follow the melancholy, which at present consumes you. Then listen to me. What I covet would be nothing for you to grant, and yet how unspeakably much for me to receive!

"Allow me to see you sometimes, allow me to write to you now and then, and if you would highly reward my devotion, occasionally send me an answer.

"Never again, I assure you, shall the word love be mentioned by me, either verbally or in writing, until you your-

self—should that happy time ever arrive—permit it. I ask to be to you a father, brother and friend. I know not if you have such—in the full meaning of the words.

"And now I have finished.

"May you look with charity upon my letter, for it is penned in a spirit of deep respect.

"My brother has admitted his fault, and received pardon. I hope that he will never again make use of my name in any step which might excite your displeasure.

"Your most devoted admirer, friend, and servant,

"EDWIN WALLENBERG."

The other letter, from the lawyer, contained the following:

"MADAME:—As I fear you might possibly have forbade your waiting-maid to deliver a letter from me, I find myself once more obliged to take advantage of my brother's more fortunate star.

"From his manner and his short answers I conclude that you have dismissed him as well as myself; but he will venture to write—without doubt he will do so—and therefore I have got this ready to slip into his envelope, which he generally closes very carelessly.

"I would not have made this miserable confession to you, but that I do not care that you should think that my esteemed brother had kindly afforded me his assistance; oh, no, he is no friend to any fellowship in certain matters. I, on the contrary, think it has its advantages at times, so I borrowed the letter from the messenger. If it was wrong, you must blame the dangerous doctrines of the present day, and not me. I have been misled, like many others.

"After this preface which was due to the post, I shall continue with more composure.

"Can you believe, madame, that I am writing this letter on my knees, not in a figurative sense, but in sober reality. I solemnly declare that at the present moment the world contains not a more penitent sinner than myself.

"Ah, what anguish it is to have angered you! This anguish can only be compared to the depressing feeling of having deserved your displeasure—perhaps even your contempt.

"I might almost be tempted to look upon the visit which I was so bold as to pay you, and all that I said during it, as a feverish dream, if your displeasure, so severely expressed, did not convince me, sorely against my will, that I was guilty of these follies.

"The only possible way, not to conciliate you, but to make my exclamations intelligible to you, is frankly to confess that I frequently resemble that unfortunate race called *crack-brained*. I took it into my poor head that I, fool though I be, was selected for your comforter. I could have sworn with the most sacred oaths, that I adore you, not as an unattainable ideal, but as an earthly divinity, whom I would have liked to have won at any price.

"Alas, madame, that at least was a dream. When I awoke I recollected—what I always forget in my dreams—that for the last two years I have been engaged to my cousin, a charming little girl of great merit. Oh, would not my dear, adored Bertha be enraged, if she suspected the follies of her intended. As a wife, however, should she ever hear of them, she shall learn that similar freaks are of little importance.

"Forgive me, dear madame, for having troubled you with this confidential communication; you will surely not refuse this to me, when you reflect that the course I am pursuing is the only one I could adopt to set your fears at rest with respect to my falling back into my unfortunate errors.

"There remains only for me most solemnly to assure you that in visiting you nothing was further from my thoughts than to insult you. How could I, who adore women, insult one of the most noble and excellent of her sex. No, pray, believe that all that I said sprung from the influence under which I then found myself; and if I

might crave so much—forgive and forget my folly! Your repentant and devoted slave,

“VICTOR WALLENBERG.”

“P. S.—For the short time that I shall spend in my mother's house, I shall consider it my duty to avoid you. I should blush with shame if I saw you again. Consequently this is as good as taking leave for life.”

A few hours later the young widow dispatched two notes in answer to her different correspondents; to the rector she wrote:

“SIR: As I highly prize your frankness and delicacy, and approve of your sincerity, I hasten to give you as sincere and frank an answer.

“My life is bound to him to whom I have sworn fidelity even unto death. Nothing will dissuade me from this.

“It is in your power, however, to render me more miserable than I am, for if you do not cease to give me such plain proofs of your sympathy, I must quit the asylum which I have chosen.

“MATHILDE BENDELVIK.”

To the young lawyer she wrote the following:

“SIR: I think I have already told you that I consider you a very forward person; it is therefore unnecessary to repeat it. I pity your Bertha very much indeed.

“With respect to the farce in which you were pleased to assign me a part, I pardon you for two reasons: in the first place because you have shown sincere repentance, and secondly, because I wish to beg you to do me a great service.

“Ride into town this evening, and fetch me from thence a letter, which ought to arrive to-day. If I can count upon your kindness, I shall receive my letter to-morrow forenoon, perhaps quite early, instead of to-morrow evening. I do not consider this a very severe punishment for your delinquencies toward me.

“MATHILDE BENDELVIK.”

When the young lady had sealed her letters, she contemplated the last note with an expression which might almost have been called roguish, if her eyes had not retained their undeniable melancholy.

“Thank Heaven for this idea,” said she to herself, “it will spare me at least seven hours of anxiety, for, dear though his beloved Bertha may be to him, the blockhead will be sure to ride half the night to do my bidding.”

CHAPTER X.

LETTER FROM THE CITY.

THE self-love of woman is certainly not all-seeing, but very often a tolerably true prophet. Mathilde had said to herself, “dear though his beloved Bertha may be to him, the blockhead will be sure to ride half the night to do my bidding.”

Victor really did ride the whole night; and he did so with the more pleasure, because he really had a cousin called Bertha, a sister to the rector's youthful flame, but this young lady was as ignorant as the frivolous young man himself, of any engagement existing between them. They had not seen each other for at least ten years, but the cunning lover had taken it into his head that it would be a splendid idea to pretend that he had a *fiancee*, it might reassure the widow, and if he once stood on a good footing with her, it would be then quite time enough to laugh over the joke.

The person for the time being most discontented with his prospects, was naturally the rector, who happened to awake in the morning, just as Victor galloped into the court-yard; it might have been about five o'clock.

Edwin was not aware that his brother had gone away on horseback the evening before; he therefore put himself to the trouble of enveloping himself in his dressing-gown,

and stretching his head out of the window to see who it was that had arrived so early, and in such haste.

“What does this mean?” muttered he. “Victor is covered with dust, as though he came from—”

Edwin proceeded no farther with his soliloquy, for with three springs the young lawyer was off his horse, and standing beneath his brother's window, which was not at a great height from the ground.

“Are you curious?” asked Victor, as he held up the letter addressed to Mrs. Bendelvik.

“What is the meaning of this?” demanded Edwin, holding out his hand.

“It means that I am much more fortunate than you, in your security, imagine. Tell me, have you also been entrusted with a particular commission?”

“You have not got that letter with her consent,” answered the rector, with a vehemence quite new to him.

“So that's your opinion?”

Now it was Victor who assumed an air of scorn.

“Take care you do not carry your foolery a little too far. A letter—”

“Which one is requested to fetch by the most beautiful of the beautiful. What is more natural than that a man should fetch it.”

“You were requested, indeed!” The rector shrugged his shoulders disdainfully.

“Poor brother, I respect your disbelief, it is very excusable in your position.”

“None of your nonsense, Victor. How did you get that letter?”

“At the post-office in town.”

“Ah, I understand; the postmaster sent it to you by chance. A peasant lad of this neighborhood might as well have brought it.”

“Without doubt, if Mrs. Bendelvik had written to this peasant, and in the most condescending manner, begged his kind aid.”

“Oh, indeed! So you mean to assert that she has written to you?”

“Yes, certainly. The messenger who yesterday brought you the note that seemed to afford you so much pleasure, had already delivered one for me.”

“She wrote me an answer to a letter of mine, but you do not surely expect to make me believe that she thus unceremoniously began a correspondence with a man who had literally insulted her.”

“I never said that she began the correspondence.”

“What, have you been so bold—”

“Merely to slip a tiny scrap of paper within your roomy envelope,” continued Victor, slyly. “Remember, every thing is allowable in war and in love.”

The rector became crimson.

“By heavens, you confer too great an honor upon me by always using my name as a shield!”

“Would you wish me to provide myself with another?”

“Of course.”

“Your wish is already gratified. I have found a most excellent shield, or, more properly speaking, a talisman.”

“And what does that consist of?”

“That is my secret; you must be satisfied with the result. You see it before you.”

“But,” exclaimed Edwin, maliciously, “do you know who this letter is from, which has delighted you so much to be permitted to fetch?”

“What does that signify to me?”

“Suppose it were from another lover!”

“What a confounded stupid idea!”

“Nay, it is a capital idea of hers to get you to fetch it.”

“To what black thoughts will envy not give rise!” cried Victor.

“And,” retorted Edwin, “how unreasonably blind is simplicity, when coupled with selfishness!”

“I care nothing for your hints respecting myself; but you accuse the purest of women of an unworthy action.”

"Oh dear, no! merely an action which does honor to her wit."

"I tell you," protested the lawyer, "it would be an unworthy action, if, just at this moment, when all the world fancies that she is mourning her husband's loss, she did—"

"Poor simpleton," said Edwin, interrupting his brother, "would you think she deserved to be called unworthy if she listened to you, or to me? Well, why may she not have listened to a third, who was sooner in the field than we were?"

"You will never induce me to put faith in this abominable insinuation."

"You are becoming quite deranged. Why abominable?"

"Enough; this young widow is undoubtedly a noble and pure-minded creature. I respect her as much as I love her, and I will not insult her a minute longer by listening to you."

"Well, well, I know nothing about her. Let us look at the address!"

"Yes, look at it. If you understand any thing of such matters you must perceive that this is a lady's handwriting; besides, the very way the letter is folded betrays a woman's hand."

"I must admit the truth of what you say."

"So you do see that. Now farewell! I am off to Tyssevik with this precious document."

"You surely won't be such an idiot, nor so barefaced as to expect her to receive you at this hour of the morning!"

"Oh, no. I merely intend to deliver the letter to the first trustworthy person who presents himself. My reward will come in its own good time."

* * * * *

It was half-past seven o'clock when the grated gate at Tysssevik was thrown open by a man-servant, for our cavalier on horseback.

Behind the jalousie of a window, the most outward rim of lace, belonging to a mourning cap, peeped forth—more was not visible.

But another window was flung open with a loud noise, and Ma'amselle Sophie stretched forth her head in curl papers, and covered with a bright-colored silk handkerchief.

"Bless me, Mr. Victor Wallenberg, you here so early!" and the officious Ma'amselle Sophie, thinking it a sad pity that the young gentleman should be condemned merely to speak to the men-servants, hastened down stairs; not however, before she had torn off her curl-papers and pushed back her long locks behind her ears, to fall in ringlets over her neck.

Sophie was not quite pleased with the young lawyer, on account of the off-hand way in which he had received her favors; notwithstanding, however, it was a small diversion in this dead and alive place, to make another attempt. But, gracious, how indignant she became when she perceived the young man, while she was yet making the most awkward of all awkward courtesies, deliberately turn his horse, and, consequently, his own person, in her very face.

"This is pretty politeness, indeed. I thank you humbly, sir! But, stop, are you not going to speak to a soul, Mr. Wallenberg?"

"Oh, I have spoken to the lad already. However, have the goodness, ma'amselle, to take that letter there, which I received yesterday in town, and convey it immediately to Mrs. Bendelvik."

"Heavens above, there can be no such fearful hurry! Perhaps you will wait, sir, until I have taken it to her."

"It is not necessary, ma'amselle," he cried, as he rode off in great haste.

* * * * *

What were the contents of this much-longed-for letter, we know not, but one thing is certain, that at least twenty times in the course of that day, the young widow's eyes and lips were animated with a smile, and one could easily observe that this sunny smile came from her heart.

"It is most cheering and refreshing to see you looking so happy," exclaimed Ma'amselle Sophie, unable to conceal her astonishment.

Mathilde started at these words, and, wrapping herself again in the veil of her widow's grief, looked like—a Niobe.

CHAPTER XI.

CONFIDENTIAL BULLETINS.

THREE days had passed since Victor had performed the character of postman, but still no reward had been heard of.

This was the more vexatious, because Edwin did not allow his arrogance to fade from his memory, and continually asked him, in the most spiteful tone of voice, if he would not soon be paying his respects to his beautiful lady love, or if he intended to wait at home until she should be pleased to make use of him again as courier.

"Go to the devil with your absurd questions, and leave me in peace!" cried Victor, when, on the fourth morning of these most uncomfortable days, his patience was entirely exhausted.

"Would you not like me first to tell you a piece of news which I have gathered while you dared not move from home for fear of missing some message from your inflexible one?"

Victor pretended he did not hear.

"Well, I will not trouble you. Besides, it is upon the whole too much generosity on my part to repeat to a rival the reports which I have received."

"As you please, my dear fellow; I perceive, however, that you are just as dying to speak as I am to hear. Come, out with it—don't be modest, pray!"

"Hem!"

"This little witch shall not disturb the good feeling between us. In the solitude of this place, where no other diversion remains for us, we might at least speak of her."

"Well and good!" said Edwin.

"But what is your source of information?"

"That is *my* secret," replied the rector.

"Which is more transparent than mine. I imagine that you have been silly enough toward yourself—*nota bene*—to consent to the encouragements of my rejected siren."

"No matter; like the confidante in the comedy, she is exceedingly useful."

"Ah," cried Victor, "so you have let yourself down—"

"Like many greater men than I; by-the-by, I remember that you yourself once said it was the custom even among the ancient heathens to begin with the waiting-maid."

"I was not in earnest—but it's all one; what have you learned?"

"Well, listen; since our charmer received the letter you brought her, a secret joy has filled her, which she tries in vain to conceal from Sophie; still there seems to be a contradiction in the whole thing. Several times lately, particularly yesterday evening, when she returned from her sail on the lake, she was more excited, and more overwhelmed than Sophie ever remembers to have seen her before."

"Well, but you forget her continual sufferings," suggested the young lawyer.

"It is not that kind of suffering which has now taken possession of her, it was a violent uneasiness, which almost amounted to fear."

"Something may have befallen her on the way."

"It is not probable," replied Edwin; "besides, the lad who usually rows her, declares that nothing occurred while they were on the water. Be that as it may, is it likely that a trifling fright would have such an effect upon her as to make her pace her chamber the livelong night, at which Sophie—"

"Ha, so the bad girl actually listened."

"Of course."

"And what did she hear?"

"She heard," continued Edwin, "how our beauty wept and wrung her hands, murmuring at intervals half-broken sentences, such as—'Alas, alas! This is very improper. I will not—I dare not, and will not agree.'"

"Edwin," said Victor, while a deep glow dyed even his brow, "it appears to me that you are acting dishonestly. Hang it if I wish in this manner to obtain any information whatever, respecting her."

Edwin was silent. He took two or three turns up and down the room, with his hands behind his back.

"Sincerely speaking," at length he exclaimed, "I am of the same opinion as yourself, and I wish that this absurd folly had never been brought forward; but this is an affair which concerns self-love, and self-love is a sensitive mistress."

"Above all, brother, it is an affair which concerns honor, and honor is even more sensitive than self-love."

"Are you so very punctilious?"

"In certain cases I allow my conscience to influence me, and a poor innocent woman who has done us no harm, cannot help that a couple of idle young fellows have chosen to fall in love with her. She might be left in peace in her own house, at all events."

"The more so," added the rector, "because I will not swear that I am madly in love with her. I even confessed as much to her in my letter."

"What, have you already owned that to her?"

"Yes, I have; I could think of no other way of accounting to her, with honor, for my deep interest in her."

"Blockhead, such impetuosity might have been in keeping with my character, but that you should do such a thing, was downright madness."

"No, it was politic. I did not play my game badly, I assure you, only she is so unlike all other women, that nothing produces an effect upon her."

"Then you received a decided refusal?"

"Rightly guessed; but it does not prevent my being more eager than before to accomplish my purpose. It is the old story, opposition excites to go on. But let us promise each other not to spy upon her through others, that were abominable—mean, and we must not have that lain to our door."

"Hush, some one is coming," said Edwin, as a maid-servant entered, and handed the rector a note.

"What is that?" cried Victor, as soon as they were again alone.

"A bulletin from Sophie, whom I left only two hours ago; what can she have to communicate?"

"Make haste and read it."

"Brother," answered the rector, "do you forget what duty and conscience prohibits? No, no, we must not demean ourselves, we will be heroes, and burn this letter."

"But, at all events—"

"At all events," repeated Edwin, interrupting his brother, "honor is more sensitive than self-love. I will make an alumette of it. The greater the temptation, the greater the virtue at having conquered."

Victor was silent, and Edwin continued:

"Let us come to some determination. Shall we burn the letter, give up the widow—and our bet—and set off to-morrow morning for some watering-place?"

"Could you do this?"

"I can do anything to which I make up my mind."

"But," urged Victor, "we have promised my mother two months."

"We might persuade her to accompany us. Then it is decided, we are to put an end to this absurd affair?"

The rector seized a taper, and opened the little box containing the matches.

"Wait a minute. I do think I really am captivated. I cannot give her up in this manner, although I sincerely wish I had the courage to beg you to burn the note."

"Thus it always is," said the rector; "people wish

themselves every possible quality to lead them to choose right. People can preach admirably, can bring forward no end of excellent phrases when others are in question; but when the time arrives to act upon them themselves—"

"Enough of your moralizing; open the note at once."

Victor spoke these words eagerly, yet in a determined tone. Almost instantly the seal was broken, and Edwin read aloud:

"DEAR MR. WALLENBERG: Out of friendship for you I must inform you that madame has been talking of asking your brother to come here this afternoon, to look at some legal documents. 'Ah,' I said, 'there can not be a more learned and a more clever gentleman than the rector.' 'I do not doubt it,' she answered; 'but he is not a lawyer.' 'But madame, since you are always so particular, permit me to remark that the rector ought perhaps to be present; no one could say a word against two, but one—'"

"What a sly confidante!" exclaimed Victor, who with difficulty restrained his laughter. "You have a capital ally."

The rector did not answer, but continued to read—

"Your frankness, my dear Sophie," replied madame, "can only be excused by your good intention, but I have my reasons for seeing Mr. Victor Wallenberg this time alone."

"This time!" cried both the brothers, almost in one breath. The letter ended with the following sentence, which the rector hurried over, half muttering,

"I flatter myself I have been of use to you, sir, and it will be a pleasure to me always to remain your friend."

"SOPHIE TOLANDER."

"Hang it, the affair is becoming interesting," cried Victor, as the rector tore up the epistle. "We both appear to have gained hope."

"It is evidently clear," admitted Edwin, "that you have now got the advantage."

"Yes, perhaps as legal adviser; that, of course, is as clear as that this note, over which we pondered so much, concerns matters of business."

"Well, I have given you my confidence, and I hope, when you come home, you intend to do what is right, and pay me back in the same coin."

"Upon my honor I will tell you every thing which can interest you. Remember, however, that we lawyers are a kind of father confessors, and we must keep sacred the secrets confided to us."

"No crooked ways with me; go straight forward to work."

"It may all be a misunderstanding, or a tale of Ma'am-selle Sophie's invention."

It proved to be neither the one nor the other; an hour later Mrs. Bendelvik sent a servant to request Mr. Victor Wallenberg to do her the favor to call at her house that afternoon. The rector began to grumble, but Victor was radiant with joy. As usual, when he was fortunate, he became presumptuous, and taunted his rival; however, they both looked forward to the afternoon with equal impatience.

CHAPTER XII.

ENCOURAGEMENT WITHOUT LAW.

"It is warm to-day, Sophie, assist me to take off this black dress, and give me one of my summer muslins, the silver grey with the white flowers."

Sophie brought the light dress, but she was too discreet to show that she was surprised.

No, the waiting-maid did not appear astonished, even

when she observed with what care her mistress began and finished her toilette. She was very nearly uttering an exclamation of surprise, however, when she beheld the usually indifferent Mathilde three times take off, and again put on, the black lace cap which almost concealed her golden hair, but finally hang it on the edge of the dressing-glass.

"I am curious to know," thought Sophie, "what will be the end of this."

"Sophie—" The pretty widow seemed to have some difficulty in forcing herself to utter the following words: "Sophie, I think, somewhere in my wardrobe, I have a lilac and black silk net."

"Yes, madam, with three lappets, which hang down at the side. Your dress-maker said it would be most becoming to you."

"I do not care how I look in the net; it is cool and light; bring it here."

"La, bless me! I never could have imagined such a thing," Sophie continued to reason with herself. "Assured as I am alive she is in love with the lawyer, but if I have any influence he shall be thrown overboard, the stupid, saucy young fellow, and not to have eyes to see that there are more ladies in the world than one."

Even a strong will is not always able to accomplish its desire, and this afternoon there was every likelihood that Ma'amselle Sophie would be obliged to display very great talent and tact indeed in order to bring into disfavor the gentleman upon whose downfall she had determined.

* * * * *

True to his new character, our young lawyer made his appearance with the air of a man prevented by a prior affection from allowing any other feelings to sway him, except those of friendship and humanity. He had brought forth from his mother's jewel-case an old gold ring, which he frequently rubbed with his pocket-handkerchief, not for the sake of making it bright, for the ring was in good preservation, but in order to draw the young widow's attention to this pledge of fidelity which had been given to him by another.

Never before had he seen Mathilde looking so well as she did on that day. It is true a shade of interesting sadness still lingered on her brow, but the melancholy which even clouded the brilliancy of her eyes, had, on this occasion, some affinity to earth. So much is certain, as she slowly raised her long, silken eyelashes, and gazed at her guest, he felt as if he had received a sudden shock; but quickly recovering his self-possession, he bowed as calmly as if he were standing before a total stranger.

Not so with her, however. "I have to thank you, Mr. Wallenberg," she said, as with a graceful movement she offered him her hand, "for your extreme kindness in—in—" she broke off, blushing deeply, and much embarrassed.

"I consider myself very fortunate, madame, in having been of service to you, even in so trifling a matter as fetching a letter."

"This letter was of importance to me."

"I perceive so," replied Victor, "and perhaps, in consequence of its contents, I am honored with your commands to present myself to you to-day."

The blushes on the young widow's cheeks now deepened to purple, which made her so charming that it was only with unheard-of difficulty that the enamored Victor could maintain his advantage as disinterested observer.

"I fancied, perhaps, you might have some complicated legal question to place before me, and possibly the letter which you received contained an explanation about which you were anxious to ask me."

Mathilde smiled in a most peculiar manner. Then she seemed to be reflecting, as if his words had given her thoughts a new direction.

"The deuce!" mentally exclaimed our lover, "supposing the information given by Edwin's correspondent were not

quite authentic—hang it, she might have merely pretended to her waiting-maid that she wished to speak to her lawyer—and I, blockhead that I am, may have marred my own fortune."

"Have the goodness, Mr. Wallenberg, to come and sit by me on the sofa, and we will then speak to each other."

"With much pleasure," replied Victor, but in despair he rubbed away at his ring, for the silence that ensued began to be rather embarrassing.

"I have, indeed, a question to put," recommenced Mathilde, as though she had not observed that there had been such a long pause, "a straightforward answer to which is of the greatest importance to me."

"I am at your service, madame."

"But I do not know if I have the courage to proceed!"

"The courage— Do you intend to put this question to the lawyer, or to the man?"

"To both, sir!"

"Indeed?"

"Yes, truly."

"Well, then, think only of the lawyer, and you will have the courage to say all that you may wish. Can one not speak to a physician about every thing respecting the body, to a clergyman about every thing respecting the soul? Why, then, should one hesitate to speak to a lawyer about every thing respecting personal affairs?"

"But these personal affairs might be very closely connected with secrets which concern the heart."

"Quite true, hence it is that those who fill the position of judge have far more opportunity than other people of penetrating these secrets which belong to the most intimate relationship of family life, and lead to long lawsuits."

"But," replied Mathilde with downcast eyes, "one has not always the right words at command, and I think," now in her turn she began to twist her wedding-ring—"I shall not be able to find them to-day."

"Need you be on so much ceremony with me, madame?"

"I know not how it happens, but your manners to-day, which are so totally different from those on your first visit, inspire me, if not exactly with fear, at least with a certain uneasiness."

"Hang it," swore Victor, *nota bene*, to himself, "I declare she is literally encouraging me. What a blessed idea that was of the betrothal ring. We must now try and push the affair on cleverly."

"The last time, madame," began Victor, in the most dignified manner. "The last time I behaved like a fool, and it is a great blessing that I have still a wholesome recollection of my fault."

Mathilde did not answer.

"Might I venture to tell you why it is a blessing?"

"If you like."

"It is a blessing because there are intoxicating faults which might perhaps lead a poor sinner into the temptation of again rushing into danger, if memory did not warn him that the temptation would be punished."

"By conscience?" asked Mathilde, innocently.

"Madame!" Victor gave the young lady a look of undisguised admiration.

"Have you heard lately from your fiancée?" she inquired, as a roguish smile played around her lips.

"You are extremely kind, to take so much interest in me—but are we not wandering sadly from our subject?"

"I am very sorry to have given you so much trouble for nothing. But the more I think of it, the more impossible I find it to-day to speak with you of this matter in question."

"Will you grant me permission, then, once and away, to pay my respects to you?"

"I will not decline your request, indeed I never should have wished to have deprived myself of the pleasure of intellectual society, if, from the beginning of our acquaintance, you had held out such a warrant for it."

"Admit, madame, that if I appear in a new character, you also present yourself in one quite as new."

"Every one has moments when life looks more cheerful. But I must not trespass any longer upon your time and patience," she said, rising.

"May I call again to-morrow afternoon?" urged Victor.

"Not to-morrow, but the day after to-morrow," replied Mathilde.

"In the morning, or in the afternoon?"

"In the morning—to-day is an exception; I wish to keep the afternoons to myself."

After the young lawyer had left the room, his assumed gravity scarcely suppressing the beaming joy of his countenance, Mathilde threw herself back on the sofa, lost in deep thought. One would have fancied she had utterly forgotten the scene just enacted, and her partner in the same, but it was not so; for, after long and serious reflection, she said in the sweetest of under-tones:

"What else can I do, young and unprotected as I am?"

A half an hour later she rang for Sophie, and asked—

"Is the boat ready?"

"Yes, madame."

"It is well, give me my bonnet."

CHAPTER XIII.

A MYSTERIOUS SOUND.

ON quitting Tysselvik, Victor, being seized by an irresistible longing for solitude, directed his steps toward the agreeable grotto among the cliffs, where we first made the acquaintance of the brothers. A similar feeling had very possibly arisen in the breast of the rector, for he had already taken possession of this identical spot.

"Congratulate me!" cried Victor, who could not keep his hopes to himself, since fate had thrown his brother in his way.

"You ought rather to congratulate me!" replied Edwin, drawing a tiny pink note, in the young widow's handwriting, out of his pocket.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded Victor, with flushed cheeks.

"Look!"

Victor snatched the note from his brother, and read the following, in a voice broken with anger:

"SIR:—As I can rely upon you that the subject we discussed last is exhausted, and forever set aside, I wish to profit by your advice to-morrow morning, respecting what books I had better read during my stay in the country."

"MATHILDE BENDELVIK."

The brothers gazed long at each other.

"Now, what do you say to that?" began the rector. "Is this not an unexpected happiness? You may as well look upon her as my wife, and relinquish your claims at once."

"Look upon her as your wife, indeed! I am perfectly convinced that I shall win the bet, and the note to you is a mere stratagem to set me racking my brains, or to inspire me with a dash of jealousy, which may give rise to a little scene or two between us. She understands what she is about, and I advise you to confine yourself to the more modest character of brother-in-law, for another character will never fall to your lot."

"Conceited idiot! are you in earnest when you compare your chances of success with mine?" sneered Edwin.

"I can't help laughing and pitying you, poor book-worm," retorted Victor.

"What sort of a lawsuit did she have to entrust to you?"

"There was no mention of a lawsuit. Can't you understand that the waiting-maid was deceived? Can't you understand that, in every age, people make use of pretexts when they wish to renew an acquaintance?"

"Poor fellow, can't you understand what it is to govern

by the power of the mind? that is what I intend to do—but, hush—listen—do you not hear music in the distance? She is coming!"

"Ah! I hear her too—Oh, my enchanting fair one, shall I then be permitted to listen once more this evening to the melodious sound of your voice?"

"Silence! Hold your tongue—she draws near."

There was profound silence in the grotto; meanwhile the boat approached in which the young widow was sitting, without any suspicion of being overlooked. The brothers knew a spot, where, once before, they had enjoyed some delightful moments and without giving each other a hint of what they were about to do, they both slipped into this retreat.

When Mathilde did make her appearance, how different she looked from when they had first beheld her. Her countenance now actually beamed with the thoughts which were passing in her mind.

She sang as angels would sing if they condescended to let their heavenly music be heard upon earth. The melody was descriptive of love, bliss, delight. Now and then she cast a lingering, searching glance along the banks. She seemed to shudder at every breath of wind which agitated the boughs of the trees, but as no human form presented itself, she evidently became re-assured, and her lovely countenance was animated with inward joy.

At length the boat disappeared behind the dark outlines of two projecting rocks, and soon after the tones died away, but at that moment the brothers started.

"What was that?" they asked, simultaneously, as they gazed in astonishment in every direction.

"Could it be an echo?"

"Could it be a shepherd's fife?"

"Neither the one nor the other; it was much more likely to be her deceased husband answering her from Heaven."

"Yes, the tones did seem to come from above, or one might almost be tempted to believe it were a water nymph, striking his silver harp!"

"Wonderful!"

"Strange!"

The brothers had heard sounds which seemed to be answering the lady's sweet music; of course it was only fancy, but the incident had made them both serious, and on their way home they totally left off their mutual boasting.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SECOND RECEPTION.

WE are now in a pavilion which belongs to the Tysselvik property. Mathilde—once more dressed in black, again serious and melancholy—is sitting at the window waiting for her other lover, whose turn it is to-day to pay his respects to her.

She did not have to wait long before the rector, Mr. Wallenberg, made his appearance. It is possible, notwithstanding his asseveration to the contrary, that he hoped to work upon her heart; there was something conceited in his smile, and way of greeting her, which displeased Mathilde, for she received him with cold formality.

"You are doubtless surprised that I have taken this step," she began in so unconstrained and dignified a manner that it ought to have chased all conceit; but the rector's conceit, when once awakened, was not so easily chased away.

"By no means, madame," answered he; "I have all along hoped that you would do me this favor."

Mathilde drew herself up stiffly, as she replied, in a tone of annoyance: "Although I have been forced, for reasons known to myself, to alter my determination in one respect, I am by no means obliged to alter it in another."

Edwin Wallenberg began at length to comprehend that women do not always wish people to meet their whims half-way.

"I am truly unfortunate, madame, in having drawn upon myself your displeasure by an unguarded answer; still, I think it was not necessary to repeat what you have already announced with so much precision."

"Indeed it was necessary, for I saw at once by your manners that you had deceived yourself respecting the meaning of my note. Now, however, I hope that we understand each other, and we will speak of something else."

"Certainly, madame. You referred to the choice of some books."

"We will return by-and-by to this subject. Tell me first how long is it since your brother was engaged?"

"My brother—engaged!"

"Well, yes."

"This is a question I assure you which is not easy for me to answer."

"Why not?"

"What can be the meaning of this?" thought the rector; "can Victor have given himself out to be engaged—or is it an idea of hers? At all events it would be a pity to rectify this innocent mistake;" but aloud he replied:

"My brother's secrets are not mine, allow me therefore to consider the question as not put to me."

"This was a politic answer, I hope," he continued again, aside.

"Ah, so it is a secret engagement; I beg pardon for my indiscretion."

"But who could have told you?" asked Edwin.

"Himself."

"Himself!"

"Yes; and as he wears a ring, I supposed the affair was known."

"Oh, indeed, so he wears a ring; he has never shown it to me."

"And have you never seen his intended?" inquired the widow.

"No, that I have not; at least, not that I am aware of," answered the rector, who did not know how he should turn to his advantage the strange piece of intelligence which he had just heard.

"I should think, as her cousin, you ought to know a certain Bertha, who—according to her intended—is a lady of much merit."

"My dear madame, I feel myself in a strange position at present, and I must trust to your generosity to allow of my escape."

Mathilde made a movement of assent, and immediately, as if nothing else had been spoken of, she entered upon a most serious literary discourse, during which the rector found a legitimate opportunity of displaying his much and varied knowledge. He had gradually assumed his usual modest, agreeable, and thoughtful bearing.

* * * * *

"I have passed a most pleasant and instructive hour," said Mathilde, when her guest arose to take her departure.

"If you are not merely flattering me, madame, you might give me a proof of the sincerity of your words."

"I shall have much pleasure in doing so. Come again the day after to-morrow, at the same time; every second morning is for you."

"And every other for—?"

"Let us retain the agreeable impression of each other which we possess at present," she hastily said, as she made a slight bow which obliged her guest to put an end to his morning call.

The visits of the brothers became regular after this time. On Monday Edwin paid his respects to the widow, on Tuesday Victor paid his, and so on throughout the week.

But though the brothers boasted greatly to each other of their hopes, yet these hopes never seemed on any day nearer realization. Love was a subject strictly forbidden as far as it respected the widow herself. They spoke the more, therefore, of the wonderful power of this feeling,

but the more they dwelt on this power—the rector quoting traditional examples, which he took the trouble to hunt up from the most remote pages of history, Victor selecting his from the newest novels—the colder Mathilde became, and she never looked up unless her lovers from time to time seemed about to break from her thankless chains. Then a sigh, a glance, or a smile, and they were fascinated again.

In this manner two or more weeks were passed. The time when the bet should be decided had already half expired.

"I really sincerely think," said Edwin, one morning when it was his turn to pay the visit, "I really sincerely think that your case is not very promising, Victor. You must perceive yourself that your law disclosures do not progress."

"You are quite right with respect to the law, of course," answered Victor, with a self-satisfied smile. "She defers from day to day the question which she wishes to put to me."

"The lawsuit, then, has merely been a pretext?"

"Naturally. She expects, very probably, that I, on my part, should put a question."

"Oh, never!" cried the rector, laughing. "She well knows that you are engaged."

This was the first time that Edwin alluded to the matter.

"Ah, so you know that story?"

"She has no secrets from me," replied Edwin.

"Indeed—then perhaps you are also aware what advantages my engagement has obtained for me?"

"Bah!" retorted the rector, who knew nothing about it, though he assumed, nevertheless, a knowing look.

Now it was Victor's turn to burst out in a hearty laugh.

"I see through you, brother mine."

"Hush—I hear my mother coming."

It was Mrs. Wallenberg, as Edwin had guessed, who was anxious to announce to her sons that they might shortly expect another diversion in their solitude. But we will not collect the news from Mrs. Wallenberg herself; it is enclosed in another correspondence, which we will now lay before our readers.

CHAPTER XV.

[Correspondence.]

MISS HILDA VON LENKEN'S LETTER TO HER SISTER.

"DEAREST BERTHA: I can no longer withstand your affectionate and constant entreaties; I will tell you the truth. Alas, pride is an enemy difficult to be overcome! The triumphs which pride has obtained over me by hard fighting, have made my very heart bleed.

"You are right. All the gaiety of this bathing-place is killing me—besides, the last days of the appointed time is fast approaching, and yet he has not come.

"I hide my burning brow in the paper, which seems to redden at my blushes. We poor women are born to endure humiliation, and we may not even complain. Dear, sympathizing girl, how could I have so long withstood those eyes which day after day earnestly entreated my confidence! Pardon me, for now I will conceal nothing from you. But to make my position more clear to you, let us review the past.

"It is now rather more than three years ago, that just as we arrived opposite the Torup Hotel, our light carriage was very nearly upset by coming into collision with a gig, which came dashing along at a tremendous rate.

"Bertha, Bertha, do you remember how frightened we were, and how we would have been pitched into the ditch, if the gentleman who was driving the gig had not instantly sprung out, and seized the reins of our horses.

"Even now tears fill my eyes at the recollection of the strange, delightful feeling which came over me, as I beheld

him, so handsome, so courageous, yet with anxiety painted on his pale, manly countenance, standing there, almost like one of the mail-clad heroes of old, holding back our terrified horses.

"And afterward, Bertha, when he accompanied us into the best room of the inn, where he played the host, while our usual protector, old Lars Peter, took care of himself, do you recollect how, in the exuberance of our spirits, we both forgot mama's repeated warning, 'dear girls, be prudent when you are in the society of young men.' Did we not tell him how, during papa's absence from home, mama had given us leave to drive into town to make some purchases for papa's birthday? Did we not describe to him, even to minute details, the grand *fete* which we were going to celebrate? Did we not listen to his advice, and did we not end by declaring, should he be passing in our neighborhood, that nothing would be more delightful than that our new acquaintance should surprise us at the *fete*, and take a part in the merry doings?"

"He smiled kindly and sadly at our youthful conversation, and gazed upon us, I fancied, almost as if he pitied so much innocence and childishness. And thus we parted. Oh, that we had parted forever! But it was otherwise decreed, and I thought I should have fainted when, at the beginning of that memorable *fete*, you came rushing in, and whispered in my ear:

"The gentleman, whose name we do not know, but whom we invited for papa's birthday, is in the court-yard. What shall we say to papa and mama?"

"We stood transfixed, like two criminals, but ere we had summoned up courage to move, we beheld, to our astonishment, papa himself ushering in the guest, and he presented him to us as his young friend Major Richard H—. It appeared that papa and he had met several times before, and as our acquaintance with him now also became known, it almost seemed as if we had been intimate all our lives.

"But why do I repeat this? You know it well already.

"Yes, yes; but you do not know—at least I hope not—I, imprudent girl that I was, did not sufficiently restrain my feelings when I chanced to find myself alone with him. Either my conscience, it is, which will speak, or the craving of love to excuse the loved one—enough, I think—I must admit it—I *know* my heart yearned toward him. I call God to witness, my dear Bertha, that I never so far forgot myself as to betray my secret by any weakness on my part; still he was encouraged—hateful word—I would give a year of my life to be able to retract it, but that is not possible, for I have promised to tell you the whole truth.

"He never attempted to conceal the terrible indifference, and gloomy dejection which, at times, came over him. Notwithstanding, it is impossible for me to express to you how charming and interesting he appeared to me. Was it surprising, then, that I accepted him, when, after a few weeks of excitement and happiness, he so unexpectedly proposed to me?"

"Hush, hush, Bertha, I remember your objections without your repeating them to me. You were then only fifteen years of age, but you were more sensible than I was. You said 'wait—it seems to me that all is force work, and unnatural with this man.' And mama, alas! our dear mother, who was still among us, she also said 'wait.'

"But alas! young, foolish, impetuous, I had not the patience to wait—I was hurried forward, as it were, and I became engaged, allowing myself to be bound with the betrothal ring, almost before I had time to think of the possibility of such an event taking place.

"And from that day forward, dear Bertha, you began to complain that I was changed; from that day forward you said my heart was sealed to you. Still you continued to read its secret pages through the magnifying glass of presentiment. It was my firm determination that all which passed between Richard and myself, between his heart and mine, should remain sacred. Though others might ob-

serve, by my pretending not to see, I might free myself from pity and advice, and perhaps from being persuaded to do that to which I was resolved not to agree.

"You remember that Richard, who is independent as regards fortune, urged, with almost feverish vehemence, that we might be married early in the autumn, and papa, a poor captain, only just promoted, proprietor of a small estate, and a few houses, saw no reason why he should consent to mama's wish to defer the marriage. Her wish was carried out, however—the Almighty removed her from us, and the wedding was put off.

"Now I must tell you of the most bitter moments I ever experienced since those, so sad and full of anguish, at mama's death-bed.

"It was a fortnight after the funeral; Richard, who had not been able to come on the day of the burial, had just arrived, and you saw how sincerely he seemed to share our grief. He could only remain one week with us, and at the end of that time, he said to me one evening, in a voice trembling with agitation:

"What time did you fix for our marriage to take place, good Hilda?"

"Good Hilda—he now seldom said *dearest*, not even when we were alone, and yet once, when you remarked the want of affection in his mode of addressing me, I had the weakness to say, 'Pshaw! would you like him to resemble those insipid lovers, who parade their feelings to every one's gaze? Sensible lovers reserve endearing terms and marks of affection for their *tete-a-tete* meetings, into which the world cannot pry.'

"But on the occasion in question it was not this 'good Hilda' which wounded my heart, although it sounded more like a term of friendship than an expression of love; no, it was the restlessness of his manner, his voice, which he vainly strove to steady. There was no entreaty in his tone, at least not such as I, fool that I was, so longed to hear.

"Three months had passed since he had entered upon his hurried engagement. The fever which had urged him on to it, had cooled down. My answer was, 'As long as I am in mourning for my mother I cannot lay aside my black dress for a single day.' Under the circumstances I could not have answered otherwise.

"And how long do daughters wear mourning?" he inquired.

"Some six months, others a whole year," I replied. He did not ask which of the two I would do, and for twelve long months he never once mentioned the subject again.

"It is not possible for me to describe to you how this patience on his part pained and mortified me. I remember when, once and away, he paid us a visit, you used to fix your fond, anxious eyes upon me, and sometimes you ventured to say: 'If Richard were *my* intended, his journeyings here should stop forever.' And why so? I answered in my quiet, impenetrable manner—my only shield, my triumph!—for I believe that I should have died if you, or anyone else, had seen what I suffered, when I was at liberty to resign myself to my own reflections.

"Does he ever pay you in society the usual little attentions of a lover?" you would reply. "Does he even pay you attention when you are alone at home?"

"I would succeed in assuming an air of astonishment, and answer, with a courage which might well have been called heroic: 'My dear Bertha, you are far too romantic and ridiculous in your expectations: Richard's way of expressing his affection satisfies me, and it ought to satisfy others.'

"And how cautious, how calm, I was with him! I never let him see by my manners, or by the slightest hint that I thought, or that I even permitted myself to dream, that he might act otherwise. I full well perceived, that the first complaint on my side would be the signal to a

succession of scenes, which could end in nothing less than a rupture.

"How often he would seize my hand, and say, with sincere emotion, 'Alas, how badly I fulfill my duties! But—by-and-by, by-and-by—all will be better!'"

"He had confided to me that he had been secretly engaged, and that he had been passionately in love with this young lady, who had shared his feelings, but that during a journey in the south, which he had been obliged to make on account of his health, his beloved had been forced by her parents to marry a man whom she, of course, detested, because he was not Richard. He received this news while he was abroad, and he saw her only once again after his return home; what then took place I know not. He felt that he must endeavor to suppress the fire which was consuming him, and he determined to form new ties. Was it his fault that I did not possess sufficient outward charms, or manners attractive enough to make him forget the past? At the very beginning of our engagement, in a moment of cordiality, he had confided all this to me; since then, he has pointedly avoided the slightest allusion to his former connections.

"But now let us return to the time when the term for our mourning was ended. You know that papa then began to speak of my marriage taking place, and wished to know definitely when the bans were to be published.

"Now it was the future bridegroom who put it off first by one then the other excuse, now it was the bride, until at length people quite gave up speaking of a marriage at all. But some decision had to be come to at last; I could not eternally evade papa's questions, and your entreaties; so I proposed to papa to accompany him to the Baths, and as Richard, according to agreement, was to meet us there, I determined that these last few weeks should decide our fate.

"Can he suspect that I have come to this conclusion?"

"Bertha, I told you, at the beginning of my letter, that the allotted time was nearly past, and still he has not yet made his appearance, and but one single half-distracted letter have I received from him. Where can he be? I can not imagine. I have met some persons from his neighborhood, they have seen nothing of him; indeed, they thought that he was at this watering-place."

* * * * *

SECOND LETTER FROM HILDA TO BERTHA, WRITTEN A FEW DAYS LATER.

"At length I have had the courage to take a firm resolution, for there no longer remains any hope. He knew that on the twenty-ninth we were to leave this place, and yesterday was the thirtieth.

"We set off to-day without fail—but not home—no, no, I cannot go home at present.

"Do you remember that we have got an aunt, a good, kind old lady, who resides at Elfheim, a solitary spot in the heart of the most wild district of Smaland? When we were very young we both have played in aunt's large garden. Mama was then alive, and she wished to visit her sister once more. It was about ten years ago; I was thirteen years of age, you ten years old; and the correspondence which on first parting was carried on briskly, fell off gradually, until at length it ceased altogether.

"Suddenly our kind-hearted aunt, and her lonely dwelling-house, have returned to my memory. The idea of traveling to Elfheim has taken firm possession of me, and papa, who in his silent sympathy agrees to every thing I wish, has promised to write to you, that you might go with us, or rather meet us there, for papa can only remain a few days.

"If you ask what is the object of this journey, I answer: its object is to keep secret the step I am about to take. I do not choose to be at home when the whole neighborhood learns that my marriage is broken off. People

have so long busied themselves about it, that I would rather escape inquisitive remarks, and their hypocritical show of interest.

"As soon as I learn Richard's present abode I will write to him. Perhaps he expects to meet us at home; perhaps he is there already. If so, breathe not a word to him; I wish to tell all myself. I do not fear that I shall change my resolution. The only thing which could excuse his absence would be illness—but illness need not have prevented him from sending me one line.

"It would be unworthy of me to distress you by complaints; I have long since learned the difficult art of self-command, and I shall not waver during this last trial. Come as soon as you can to your affectionate HILDA.

"P.S.—I pray you not to put off your departure for the sake of your toilet. Aunt lives quite alone; her sons, our former admirers and playfellows, have now grown up, and are settled elsewhere. There is not a single person of consequence for miles around.

"I send you Richard's last letter. It is the first I have shown you, but it does not signify now, because you know all."

"DEAR HILDA: Yesterday I wrote you a long letter, and on each page of that letter I poured forth my soul. Why did I not send it? Because it would have been cowardice to have betrayed to you so much weakness. You are so courageous—I admire your strength of mind. But man does not like to allow himself to be humbled by an example which he can not imitate.

"So you are still at the Baths? How good you are to wait for me! I shall come without fail. There is something so brilliant and interesting in a fashionable watering-place; it is a little world of amusement. Why need I deny it, for some time past my mind has required to be diverted. Happy Hilda, in your enviable calmness of disposition, you need nothing but the force of your will to find life pleasant in any form. Ah, forgive me, forgive me! I am endeavoring to blindfold my own eyes.

"Hilda, would you have mercy upon me if I desired it?"

"Why do you never provoke me? Why are you always as patient as an angel toward me, or show a firmness which thoroughly masks despair? A few scenes such as other girls would have had with their lovers, full of complaints, anger, and irritability—and matters would have been explained between us.

"I am not well to-day. There can be nothing more awful than to plunge a dagger into the heart of a person who offers no resistance. Sophistry—sophistry—what poniard is sharper than that of words?"

"Well, I shall come to the Baths—it is so arranged. I shall start in about a week's time, but pray do not be uneasy if I delay a little longer. Farewell, my friend, come what may in future, be assured that you possess my utmost respect, my warmest sympathy, and my sincere attachment.

"RICHARD.

"P.S.—I assure you, Hilda, I deserve your pity more than your anger, while you are reading this letter. If only you knew—if you knew—But I hope, at all events, to come."

CHAPTER XVI.

BERTHA.

WE will now visit the person to whom the above letters were addressed.

The youthful Bertha was seated in a swing in front of her father's country house. She had wound one arm around the trunk of a young birch, the top of which disappeared beneath the broad vault of two ancient chestnut-trees, and her head was leaning in her other hand, while tears were forcing their way between her slender fingers, and trickling slowly down.

Some half-open letters might lead one to suppose that her emotion had been caused by their contents. Was it the misery at length poured forth in the confidence of her sister, which thus agitated Bertha? Not likely, for just then she removed her hand, exposing to view one of the most lovely little faces it were possible to conceive, remarkable both for intelligence and grace, and a scornful smile played around her rosy lips, as she half muttered:

"It is high time for the poor girl to return to reason." Bertha, who was three years younger than her sister Hilda, assumed a charming air of maternal anxiety as she thus expressed herself. "I hope," she added, in a tone of deep interest and sympathy, "I hope she will remain firm—but now that she has at last spoken openly to me, I will keep her up to the mark."

As quick as lightning a cloud obscured the sunshine in Bertha's dark eyes; she shook her little head sadly, and again began to weep.

At that moment the old housekeeper drew near, who, ever since the young ladies' childhood, had been made the confidante of all their little joys and sorrows.

"Dear me, what is the matter with you, Miss Bertha?" asked the good-natured woman; "I cannot bear to see these tears. No wonder that it is dull for you here during my master's and young mistress's absence."

"Oh, it is not that, dear Cajsa; I want to tell you something of importance."

"Mercies on us! Has the vicar dared to make love to you while the major is away? I read in his eyes, when we met him on Sunday near the church, that he longed to do so."

"You have guessed wrong."

"Well, then, I know what it is; the assessor's handsome young secretary has forgotten, perhaps, to send the last batch of books from the library. But be comforted, miss, they may yet come."

"Wrong again, Cajsa; I will not have his books any longer, his attentions are as selfish as those of the vicar; and, besides, now I can have as many books as I please of my own," said Bertha, assuming an air of pride and importance; then suddenly falling into her natural tone and manners, she cried, "Look at that poor man who is coming towards the gate."

"Dear young lady, it is doubtless a prisoner who has escaped."

"Cajsa, do you want to make me angry?" she said, jumping down from the swing and stamping her little foot upon the gravel. "Go immediately and open the grated gate. Do you not see that he is sinking from fatigue? Slow creature. I will run myself."

At that moment a carriage rolled up the alley, but Bertha scarcely glanced at it until she had conducted the old invalid—for such he was—into the kitchen, and had seen him well attended to.

"I wish I might be allowed to mind my own business," grumbled Cajsa—"and you, miss, would mind yours; the ladies in the carriage yonder would not be twisting their necks almost off to look after you."

"Hush, you old witch, I'm gone—but now you won't hear my secret. Have you ever seen a white silk bonnet with flowers?"

"Never to my knowledge!"

"Nor I either—but you may look forward to having that pleasure." Charmed at Cajsa's astonishment, the gay-hearted Bertha hastened away, and reached the hall-door just in time to welcome a carriage full of neighbors, who wished to see how their lonely little friend was getting on. But Bertha knew what value to put upon their professions of friendship.

Every Sunday after church she had been overwhelmed with sympathizing inquiries respecting her sister's journey, and questioned whether Hilda's intended had arrived at the Baths, and if the wedding-day had been fixed. Bertha therefore perceived her inevitable doom during this visit,

for, as a hostess, she had not the same means of escape, as in the church-yard.

Happily she was enabled to anticipate their queries by a volley of unexpected and voluntary communications, such as, "papa had written what a sensation Hilda had made;" she really was one of the belles at the Baths, and Hilda herself had written how greatly she had been amusing herself—she had become quite another person, and both had written that the whole family were to meet at an aunt's in Smaland, for which place Bertha was also to start by the first coach.

This was her principal theme, branching off into no end of variations, and the young girls who were paying the visit could not understand why Bertha had taken such a sudden longing for a silk bonnet trimmed with roses; could she, who never wore any thing but a straw hat plaited at home, or at best, one bought in the village, could she be contemplating such an extravagance.

But Bertha wept and laughed, and embraced her dear, kind friends, and said that her head and heart were full of a great secret, of which, however, she could not speak, until she had returned home. Upon reflection, though, she did not think she would tax her friends' patience so long; papa might relate the matter when he came back.

Half-wild from curiosity, the guests were forced to take their departure.

No sooner had Bertha, bowing at the last gate, kissed a playful farewell from the tips of her pretty fingers, than she returned toward the house with a scornful expression in her little face.

"There now, my amiable friends, you have enough to live upon for a week or two."

"Will it be enough for me, too?" asked old Cajsa, who, full of curiosity, came forward to meet her young mistress.

"Oh, no, the character of confidante shall be consigned to you. Tell me, is not ten thousand rix-dollars immense wealth?"

"It certainly is a terribly large sum," replied Cajsa, with increasing astonishment.

"Well, if you think ten thousand dollars a large fortune, what do you say to twenty thousand?"

"Twenty thousand—heaven preserve us!"

"Why not—it might even be thirty thousand."

"I am not capable of calculating so much wealth."

"Look well at me, Cajsa."

"Ah, it is not necessary for me to do so, in order to know how you look—lovely as the flowers of the field, gay as the birds of the air, and sweet and affectionate as the most gentle white dove."

Bertha laughed aloud.

"Only fancy, if a lover had made me this speech!"

"I verily believe the vicar would willingly do so."

"Nonsense."

"Or the secretary," continued Cajsa.

"Hush; I ask you, are those men lovers for me? The one old and tiresome, the other selfish and conceited. They have neither of them any chance. I can assure you, dear Cajsa, with thirty thousand rix-dollars one might get an admirer without much trouble."

"Yes, miss; if you had that vast fortune you would not have long to wait for a sweetheart; both husband, wedding, and dance would be close at hand."

"No husband and wedding for me, I thank you—the dance is all very well, but not with my own husband; I have seen enough of marriage preparations to be eager to follow that example."

"Assuredly that was no example for you to follow, miss, for nothing has come of Miss Hilda's wedding."

"Nor will anything ever come it. But now, jesting apart, I am perfectly in earnest about thirty thousand rix-dollars."

"Did you dream that you had won that sum in a lottery, miss?"

"No; but I have received a letter. Ah, dear old Cajsa, I am not as frivolous as I appear. I have some feeling."

Again the sunny expression vanished, and a strange earnestness came over the young girl's countenance.

"Gracious heavens, do not shed those ugly tears! Tell me what is the grief that oppresses you?"

"Do you remember, Cajsa, that I was always the favorite of old Mrs. Rillstedt, who used formerly to reside at Rolanda?"

"Yes," replied the worthy woman, "I recollect perfectly that you often went to stay with her, and that the old lady was never so happy as when you were singing to her."

"I was very fond of her; but when she went to live with her son-in-law we never heard any more from her, although I regularly wrote her every new year to wish her many happy returns of the season."

"My dear young lady, do make haste and come to the point!"

"Have patience, will you! I must have breathing time. I mentioned to you that I received some letters this morning."

"From the major and Miss Hilda, I suppose? But surely what you told your guests just now was not true?"

"Of course it was."

"What! that you are going to join the others at Smaland? Well, I am perfectly mystified—my brain seems quite muddled."

"You might be silent, I think, until I have finished speaking. The fact of the matter is this, that my dear friend has just written to me, that—but this is the most sorrowful part of it—she feels that her last hour is approaching, excellent old lady, and, as no one in the world has been so attentive and considerate toward her as I have been, she has altered her will—her son-in-law's disgraceful conduct toward her also determined her to take this step—and, heavens! oh, heavens! would you believe it? she has named me her heir!"

"The Lord bless the noble soul!" exclaimed Cajsa, beginning to cry.

"After they had both remained silent awhile, Bertha said quickly, and with her usual rapid transition of voice:

"Now, go back to your pots and pans, dear Cajsa. I wish to be alone with my thoughts. I start on my journey to-morrow afternoon."

* * * * *

An hour later Bertha stood gazing at a picture that hung over Hilda's bed, in the small chamber which she and her sister had shared for so many years. It was a portrait of Hilda's intended. Tears still hung like pearls on Bertha's eyelashes; she had just finished a letter full of gratitude and affection to her ancient friend, whom she could no longer hope to see again in this world.

"Doubtless I have not told her all I would have said, but she shall hear it when we meet in heaven. How happy we can all be now!—but shall we be so?" She cast an almost threatening look at the portrait of the young man, upon whose pale, lofty brow an expression of deep sadness might be traced, notwithstanding the somewhat forced smile upon his lips.

"This precious thing," she continued, snatching the painting from the wall with no very gentle hand, "shall be forthwith thrown into the lumber-room. May you never regain your place! you absurd slave to old fancies! you ungrateful creature, not to appreciate one who is too good for you!"

Without farther ceremony she carried the portrait up stairs to the garret, and consigned it to an old box, a sort of repository for forgotten rubbish.

"Sleep soundly, major, sleep until the day of judgment, or, at any rate, until the day you regain your first bride; should that event ever take place, I will disentomb you, and transform you into a wedding-gift to the fair lady. But I must now run and look over my wardrobe—it is really

a pity that both my cousins are away, or, perhaps, they might both have fallen in love with my thirty thousand rix-dollars."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE COUSINS.

THE pages allotted to a short tale will not permit of long and minute descriptions. We can not, therefore, linger over the separate arrivals of the young ladies, much less the manner in which their respected father presented himself; no, not even the remarkable sensation which Miss Bertha's thirty thousand rix-dollars, and accompanying silk bonnet, excited.

We must confine ourselves to the assurance that the major—the father—bade adieu to his kind and amiable relations with sincere regret; that the latter, on the contrary, saw the old man depart with secret joy, for, agreeable and good-tempered though he was, yet it was far more pleasant for the brothers to devote to their pretty cousins all the time which they could spare from their visits to the youthful widow. And as to Mrs. Wallenberg, she soon discovered that the major had a bad habit of giving his advice on matters in which she considered it the height of presumption to venture to question her own superior knowledge.

We will take it for granted, then, that a week has passed. It is the day after the major's departure; the party were sitting at breakfast, Mrs. Wallenberg presiding at one end of the table, with the coffee-pot on her right, and a gigantic jug of thick cream on her left.

A large antique vase, with nearly a hedge full of white and red roses, veiled from her view the sweet girls who were immediately opposite to her. But the eyes of the two young gentlemen, seated on either side of the costly centre ornament, were not blind to all the beauty which was present at table, and each was busily engaged playing the amiable to his next neighbor.

The most lovely objects in this sunny room, were, of course, the two sisters. They strongly resembled each other—and yet they were perfectly unlike. Their beautiful chestnut-brown hair, their hyacinthine blue eyes, beaming with the pureness of their hearts, their fresh lips, their fine oval countenances, and their slender, yet full figures, were as if moulded from the same form. But their air, their smile, their glance, and, above all, their manners, betrayed no family likeness.

Hilda, who was two-and-twenty years of age, and had already penetrated into the realities of life, and had become familiar with one of its gloomy phases, exhibited in her deportment that calmness and that constant seriousness, which no more indicates a morbid state of feelings than it does joyous, childish gaiety. This calm earnestness, when visible in so young a woman, is the surest proof of a mind well-versed in the art of self-command, and as sure a proof that this mind will succeed in recovering its equipoise.

Bertha, on the contrary, had just entered the threshold of life, and what she had gathered from the experience of others, had inspired her with a wish, for the present at least, of remaining what she was. We have already described how her impressions chased each other as fleetly as the wind, and yet nothing heartless or selfish could be detected in her. Ah, no, it was merely the vivacity of her lively mind which caused this apparent tendency to caprice. Had she been plunged into distressing circumstances, without losing her cheerfulness, she would have proved herself as courageous as Hilda, though very probably she would not have shown herself as placid.

We must mention that the brothers fully agreed upon two points. One was that they would not breathe a syllable to their pretty cousins respecting their designs upon the young widow, the other was that the rector, neither by

word nor by hint, should allude to Victor's pretended engagement to Bertha. If the rector had not promised to comply with this latter arrangement, the young lawyer declared he would disclose his flirtation with a certain pretty waiting-maid, and rather than permit such a slur upon his dignity, Edwin consented to seal his lips. Having come to this understanding, the brothers each went his own way. Edwin devoted himself to his school-boy flame, while Victor, whether he were standing, sitting, or walking, paid Bertha his undivided attention.

* * * * *

"My dear Hilda," the rector repeated for the second time, "you do not even deign to see that I have been offering you the biscuit-basket ever so long."

"Pardon me, Edwin."

She appeared this morning unusually absent, nor was it to be wondered at, for she expected that day's post would bring her a letter which had either been addressed to the Baths, or to her usual place of residence, but which she had directed should be forwarded to her at her aunt's.

The three words, "Pardon me, Edwin," were said in a sweet, apologizing tone; she took a biscuit, and rewarded her indefatigable cavalier with a smile.

"It does not seem," whispered Victor, as he bent down to the red little ear of *his* neighbor, "as if any thing would come of the matter which I mentioned to you yesterday, my dear cousin."

"So you flatter yourself that I remember every thing you say to me, and am able to understand your allusions without assistance from one day to the other; you are greatly mistaken, I can tell you."

"How different it is with me," replied Victor; "I can perfectly recollect every word that you spoke yesterday, the day before yesterday, and even the day before that again."

"Well, I declare, that is far greater attention than any other individual has hitherto honored me with. If you can prove to me the truth of what you advance, I will endeavor to recollect a portion of your conversation yesterday. Now, come, what did I say three days ago?"

"Victor," you said, "do you think that a white silk bonnet, with roses, would be becoming to me?" and I answered—

"Your answer is of no consequence!" cried the girl, laughing; "now we come to the day before yesterday."

"The day before yesterday you asked, 'Do you think, cousin, that a mantle of violet-colored velvet, with a light lining, would give me a more dignified appearance than I at present have?' and I answered—"

"Well, and yesterday?" she exclaimed, interrupting him a second time.

"Ah, yesterday, you called me to you, here, and said, 'My dear Victor, will there not be a chance of your falling in love with me when I have got my wardrobe in order? if you do not, I can not imagine who I shall have to admire my pretty things.'"

"Enough, enough, now it is my turn—let me see—this much I thoroughly remember, you said more insipid things yesterday than you did the day before yesterday."

"Oh, cousin mine—"

"Now, my worthy cousin, I hope you are not giving way to dangerous self-delusions. You have a horrid habit of continually paying compliments, and compliments, let me tell you, should be clever, otherwise they become—"

"Dear children, will you not have some sour milk?"

"Yes, dear aunt, we will take anything you please."

"You two are merely talking," replied the good lady of the house, whose time was much too valuable to waste at the breakfast-table after she had helped all who were present, so she pushed the sour milk over to Victor and Bertha's side.

"Dear aunt, I certainly have the intention of helping myself to sour milk—but Victor takes so much nonsense in his head."

"Then you must finish your breakfast alone, my dears," said the hostess, pushing back her chair. Hilda did the same, and the rector, in his love of order, followed their example.

"No, no, my dears, it was not my wish to disturb you," cried Mrs. Wallenberg, apologizingly.

"I have quite done, thank you," said Hilda.

"So have I, dear mother," added the rector, whose turn it was to-day to visit the still unconquered Mathilde.

"And we, what shall we do?" asked Bertha, with a most enchanting smile.

"We surely must not go away hungry from table," answered Victor.

"Then let us remain, upon the proviso, however, that we do not chatter, but really eat."

Mrs. Wallenberg had already vanished, and was now actively engaged with her household matters. Hilda had seated herself upon a small wooden bench in the entrance-hall, and kept watching the house-door. Edwin at that moment came out with his cap in his hand, and a cigar in his mouth.

"Do you intend to take a walk, dear Hilda?"

"No, I find it more agreeable to remain in the shade; do not let me detain you if you are going out."

"I'm in no hurry," he said, taking a seat near her.

For some minutes they were both silent; at length he said:

"How very much changed people find each other after a separation of eight years! And the sympathizing, one might almost say affectionate look the young man fixed upon his cousin, occasioned a slight blush to mantle her cheeks.

"True, one can scarcely recognize each other; it is what might be expected, however, for one can hardly recognize one's self after so long a lapse of time."

"I do not quite agree with you there; I see you still as I saw you at fourteen years of age, only grown more beautiful and more improved than I could have imagined it possible to have become. But the gay, unreserved girl, who confided her little secrets to her friend and playfellow, has turned into a prudent, experienced and dignified woman, who scorns sympathy as something beneath her."

At this speech Hilda's cheeks glowed still more brightly.

"I presume, cousin," she answered, "you are alluding to certain circumstances which—"

"Oh, no, do not imagine such a thing for a moment; the mere thought that you could consider my words wanting in delicacy, would pain me greatly."

"No, Edwin, I understand you better than that. We were very fond of each other at that happy age when we told each other everything; now I am convinced that not even you would care to make me your confidante."

"Not as long as you retain your severe look, certainly," answered the rector, gayly.

"I was not aware that my countenance betrayed so much severity. But, cousin, if you will not confer your confidence upon me until my face resumes the expression you remember eight years ago, very probably we shall never again exchange our secrets."

There was something in this answer which wounded Edwin ten times more than all the taunts with which the young widow was wont to torment him. He had neither been impudent nor obtruding; he had spoken feelingly and with frank confidence to the friend of his youth, a near relative, and her answer had been far more cold than it need have been, and not a word was added to soften the impression.

"I fear I am wearying you with my society. Good-bye, dear Hilda, I have something to do in the neighborhood."

"Adieu, Cousin Edwin."

Not a syllable more was exchanged.

* * * * *

In the room where the other two were still dawdling over

their sour milk, the conversation was being carried on in a most animated strain.

"Ah, well," said Victor, "now we have had enough of jesting. Have the goodness, Miss Bertha, first to repeat what I said yesterday, then we may come back to my remark about Edwin and Hilda."

"Ha, by-the-by, now I remember, you said to me, in that conceited air which is so unbecoming to you, 'Bertha, would you believe, there is not a man twenty miles around, who can be compared with me as a swimmer.' Whereupon I declared that it was extremely unfair of you to boast of an accomplishment which I never could have an opportunity of confuting."

"It is too bad to be treated in this fashion; my only consolation is, my pretty cousin, that you take advantage of our relationship."

"A nice idea, indeed; my gentleman, forsooth, fancies that a cousin of nineteen years of age is going to allow herself to be imposed upon as easily as a cousin of eleven years old. I thoroughly recollect a certain rough school-boy taking pleasure in pinching me in the arm, if I did not do exactly as he wished."

"What infamous calumny!"

"Not at all—he used also to call me an ill-natured wretch; and once—oh, that was very cruel—it pleased this said school-boy, in an outburst of passion, to break my most beautiful doll, and to throw it into a pond."

"But afterwards he fished it up again, and made it a present of his own watch-chain of bright pinchbeck, as an ornament for the neck. Of course that, however, is no longer remembered."

"Oh yes, it is, and for the sake of that splendid necklace, I will tax my memory still further—I think our conversation yesterday referred to two names on a birch-tree."

"Yes, two names which are still preserved with wonderful freshness! But what signify such omens? Those who bear the names appear totally to have forgotten the sweet dawn of their first love."

"Hush—in Heaven's name never speak of love; only look how serious Hilda has become!"

"That is the consequence of the engagement—"

"As the engagement is a consequence of love," said Bertha, interrupting him. "If I were not engaged against my will, I never would be so."

"Who knows!" cried Victor, laughing; "such things have been heard of."

"Yes, in those days when fathers treated their children like mere goods of barter; but they are happily long since past. My dearest father would now have to consult me on the subject, and I would say—"

"Well, what would you say?"

"Decidedly, no—you may rest assured of that, cousin, in case it should ever enter your brain to woo my thirty thousand rix-dollars."

"Pshaw!"

"Pray why do you say 'Pshaw!' Is not thirty thousand rix-dollars a tempting sum?"

"There is not a doubt of it, but—"

"Oh spare me your *but*! As soon as I have my fortune in my own hands, I shall establish myself as a young widow. One of these days I will confide to you the whole of my charming plan; I cannot stop at present, for I must run up stairs and try and finish my work."

And before Victor could make an attempt to restrain her, she had disappeared.

"There can be no doubt," muttered Victor to himself, as his eyes followed the young heiress with an expression of deep thought, "there can be no doubt that this little Bertha is a most fascinating creature. It was a great error on your parts, young ladies, that you did not come a few weeks sooner."

"Now, unfortunately, my honor is engaged in the other conquest: in eight days she must capitulate, or else—the deuce, suppose I am turned into ridicule, and that these

girls should know it; yet that is not possible; I set too small a value upon my abilities. I shall make way to-morrow, without fail. Hang it, that you, too, my mystical bride, must needs be so charming!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE LAST CORRESPONDENCE.

AN hour later, Hilda entered her sister's chamber pale as a lily, but like it, with head erect.

"All is at an end," she said; "this letter has been sent on from A——: Read it!"

She gave Bertha an open letter, and if it had not been for the trembling of her hand and voice, Bertha would not have been able to perceive that Hilda's heart was wrung with emotion.

"I shall leave you for a short while," she said, "to write an answer by return of post."

"And where is he then, in heaven's name?" exclaimed Bertha.

"I do not know, nor need I care to know in future. My letter was enclosed in a note for his sister, and I will send my answer through her."

"Alas! dearest Hilda!" cried Bertha, casting her arms around her elder sister.

They formed a touching group. With tears in her long silken eyelashes, Bertha pressed her rosy cheek tenderly and lovingly against Hilda's, which was cold and snowy.

"Thanks, sweet girl," she said, softly, "but let me go now, I shall learn to endure this grief."

* * * * *

"Now, then," said Bertha, when she was alone, "let us see what the major has to say; I feel the tiniest might of consolation in the midst of my sorrow, when I think that I have stowed away his portrait among the rubbish in the garret. Ah, men! horrid, abominable men!" she added, with increasing feeling. "To be sure, there are exceptions who are agreeable enough, though their amiability lasts merely until one is engaged to them."

She placed herself far back into the sofa corner, and began to read:

"ESTEEMED HILDA:" ("This, surely," exclaimed Bertha, breaking off, "must have been written from a mad-house; the man actually addresses his bride exactly as he would some old aunt, to whom he was sending his best wishes for the new year." She continued:

"After long reflection I can find no more suitable address, or one which corresponds better to our mutual positions. A proud man humbling himself before the woman who alone has the right to scorn his weakness, to judge and treat it with merited severity, or with amiable clemency.

"Hilda, high-minded, noble Hilda, a succession of months, which have been more rich in neglected duties than in duties performed, have long since proved to you that my heart * * * what shall I say to you? The truth is so harsh—I can only utter it in groans, and yet if this truth were not a firm, unalterable truth, where would be my excuse? Alas! I must gain this cruel courage for the sake of our mutual welfare.

"Hilda! I have never loved more than *one* woman, and I can never love another but her.

"Listen to the reason why, under such circumstances, I sought to form a new tie, after the first, as I have long since related to you, was cruelly torn asunder.

"About two years had slowly passed after my hopes of happiness had been dashed. I happened to be at the same baths which you are at present visiting; I had gone there without any object; two years' suffering could not cure sorrow such as mine. Still in this very sorrow was mixed a shade of joy, and it was that, perhaps, which sustained me when despair would well-nigh have overwhelmed me.

"I had received from my mother an ancient family relic; she put it into my hands with the following words:

'Richard, give this to the woman you one day may love, and let her swear to you, should her feelings toward you ever diminish, to send it back to you. Thus it will be a talisman, which, as long as it is not in your hands, will cheer your heart under all circumstances!'

'This sacred gift from a pious mother I had given to her, whose name I will not tell you, for you could not love her. And she had not only sworn to carry out the obligation attached to the present, but she had also received from me a vow as binding, namely, should *my* feelings ever grow cold, or should she no longer retain the first place in my heart, I myself would demand back the relic.'

'Well, she had been married two years, and the talisman had neither been returned, nor asked back. Chance brought us together in one of those unfortunate meeting-places, which I do believe are invented more to injure the health of the hale, than to make the sick convalescent.'

'To describe this our first meeting since that fatal day which had bound her to another. Oh, my God! a meeting amid a numerous company of strangers—forgive me, forgive me, I can not speak of it—but there is *one* scene which I must not pass over. The old story led to the same termination here as it always does: passion, struggles, and lastly a meeting.'

'The man to whom she was tied never could forgive her because she did not share his vulgar, loathsome tenderness. But he also suffered in his way—therefore I will not judge him, although he made her wretched to a degree which would have been reprehensible in any man. They had both been unhappy since this marriage.'

'It was an evening in the first days of August. The moon was playing with its soft, lovely light upon a grass plat in her garden. We had just met there. A second of intoxicating bliss and infinite agony was past. Scarcely a word or a press of the hand had been exchanged, when the husband rushed forward like a madman, and threatened her—the woman whom we both loved—with public disgrace. An infuriated tiger is less terrible than a man excited by jealousy. My blood also began to boil. But the angel stepped between us.'

'I swear,' she said, 'that it is the first time I have seen Richard alone, and I solemnly promise that, throughout my married life, it shall be the last. Do not blast my character—it would kill my mother.'

'She adored her mother, who had sacrificed her child, and who died but two months after this scene. Her voice was so beseeching and captivating as she entreated him, that her husband, whose ear had never before been charmed by such tones, instantly checked his wild ferocity.'

'If,' he said, 'this young man, your former lover, promises the same on his honor, I will have patience, and be silent; but if he would that I should really pardon my wife, and treat her kindly, whom otherwise I must always look upon with distrust, he will show that the tie between you can be still more securely severed.'

'How—what do you mean?' I asked, trembling for her.

'There are other women in the world,' he answered coarsely. 'If you have loved this one, prove it; to ensure her future peace, marry another.'

'Sir,' I replied, 'since it is your wife's own choice to remain with you, do not let her suffer for having preferred the path of honor. I will purchase her happiness at the expense of my own.'

'Do you understand all now, Hilda?—dear, dear Hilda!'

'It was an unlucky fate which cast you in my way on my return from that unhappy journey. If we had married immediately, very possibly neither of us would have been miserable. Your tenderness would have done much to have attached me to you. But I gained time for reflection—the wedding was put off, until—it would be an iniquitous act toward us both to let it take place, without every circumstance being first clearly explained to you.'

'How long has not this painful confession weighed down my heart? It was so difficult for me to speak, for I feared your feelings might be too deeply wounded. Now, however, I have said all. It is for you to decide whether the marriage shall go on, or whether it shall be broken off—whichever of the two takes place, it must be done speedily. But, listen to me—these words come from the inmost soul of an honest man. If, after this confession, you still venture to join your fate to mine, I solemnly assure you that you shall find in me a husband who will endeavor to make himself worthy of you. Farewell, sweet angel! who has so greatly deserved happiness—farewell, and forgive me, who will always look upon you as the most noble and amiable of women.'

RICHARD."

In connection with this letter, and without any commentary, we also give Hilda's answer.

'RICHARD!—I have never yet told you an untruth; you must not, therefore, do me the injustice to doubt what I am about to write you. A doubt were, however, unworthy of us both; you will therefore believe me, notwithstanding your vanity may prompt you to think otherwise. Had I known where to address a letter to you, you never would have been obliged to have written *yours* to me. I had irrevocably determined that the events which might occur during this journey to the Baths, should be your last trial. As it happened, there were no events to judge from. Your absence confirmed my preconceived opinions, and it did not even require your first letter, which was so full of indecisions, weakness, agitation, and inconstancy, to induce me to carry them out. You are aware that I have had a long time to reflect, and come to some determination. You must be assured, therefore, when once my resolution is taken, it will remain unchanged.'

'You will find your ring enclosed in this letter; I request that mine may be returned to me.'

'I do not wish to reproach you. You found an easy victim to your thoughtless promise, and if my sufferings during this last year have purchased peace for her who is all in all to you, they have been of some benefit—which is seldom the reward of pain endured.'

'You need not make yourself uneasy about my future fate. Indeed, I even thank you for delaying so long to make your confession to me. What dawns upon one gradually, is easier to bear than what comes upon one unexpectedly, while one is still under the influence of self-deception.'

'I assure you—and I request that you will believe what I say—that I do not feel unhappy at present; and I can explain why, because when I contemplate the future which might have been a burden to us both, I can only thank God that we have stopped at the point where we stand. I further thank God for having given me a patient spirit, a calm character, and for having granted me strength to overcome the weakness of my heart. I shall never give myself up to hopeless despair.'

'But you, Richard, what will become of you? Will freedom confer happiness upon you again? I can only pray for you and her; pray also for me.'

"HILDA.

"P. S.—I do not wish you to answer me."

CHAPTER XIX.

A CONFESSION—ANXIETY—A GLANCE AT THE SECRET SPRINGS.

AFTER having devoted so much time to the other characters in our little drama, we will now return to our principal heroine.

We find her in the same room, and in the same position as we saw her when first we visited the peaceful retreat, where she evidently wished to pass the last months of the period that widows are generally expected to mourn.

To-day, too, she seemed to be overwhelmed with anxiety

and sorrow; now also she held the golden heart in her hand, and as before she opened it, and passionately pressed the fair lock of hair to her lips. To finish the picture, Ma'amselle Sophie appeared also on this occasion at the door, and interrupted her mistress.

The only difference was that now Sophie cast an extremely suspicious glance at the "relic." She, who wished to be thought very clever, had long since come to the conclusion, that as the hair of the departed husband was decidedly coal-black, it was perfectly ridiculous to suppose that when shut up in the golden heart it could become lighter—as golden, indeed, as the heart itself.

If Ma'amselle Sophie Tolander and the young rector had been on the same friendly terms as formerly, she would doubtless have communicated her discoveries to him; but after he had gained access to the lady herself, he had had the folly—if not to say the ingratitude—of almost entirely forgetting that there had been a time when he and the waiting-maid had been on terms of some intimacy.

As the door opened, Mathilde hastened to hide her treasure, and she looked any thing but pleased, as she turned round, exclaiming:

"I can not conceive what is the matter now—you have only just left me!"

"Ah, dear madame," said Ma'amselle Sophie, putting on an air of humility and repentance, "I can not keep it to myself any longer. I do not wish to offend you, madame, no, not for the whole world; and yet, through my innocence and ignorance of the ways of bad people, I have been the victim of a base, hypocritical, worthless man."

"Poor, poor Sophie, however unhappy you may be, I will never desert you—who has deceived you, poor girl?"

"Heaven preserve me! How could you conceive such an idea, madame?" cried Sophie, making a low courtesy.

"I am not the person who has been deceived."

"What do you mean, then? You said you were the victim of a—"

"Mean action, dear lady; an extremely mean action. A gentleman of whom you think well, madame, and whom you have perhaps permitted to build hopes for the future, this gentleman has—has—I will speak it out at once—has induced me to spy upon you here, in this house. And for this despicable sin, into which he has led me, an innocent, simple-minded creature, he ought neither to be pardoned here on earth, nor yet in heaven."

While Sophie was making this confession, the young widow had become quite pale, and was evidently laboring under some fear, so great, that she could not bring her lips to form a single syllable.

"Mercies on me, how agitated you are, dear lady; be not angry with me. If I had not thought that he meant to act honorably with you, I can assure you I would not have allowed myself to have been persuaded. But now, since he has deceived you as well as me, he may have his dear Miss Hilda, and I know, madame, that you—"

An exclamation of unutterable agony escaped Mathilde's lips, and before Sophie could reach her mistress's chair, she had fainted away.

Half an hour had passed; Sophie lay weeping at the feet of her mistress.

"May God forgive you!—wretched girl! Is there any truth in what you said?—No, you must have accused yourself falsely—and above all accused—Repeat again the name you mentioned."

"He called her Hilda when they were driving together, and she is a lady—although I do not remember her surname."

"Were they driving together?—Girl, you are mocking me! Has any one paid you for this base conduct?"

"Never, my dearest lady! I said to the rector from the very first, 'Do not fancy, sir, that I can be bought by money—'"

"The rector—the rector!" Mathilde started up eagerly. "Are you speaking of the rector, Mr. Wallenberg?"

"To be sure I am; of whom else should I be speaking, in heaven's name?"

"Did he persuade you to spy upon me?" asked Mathilde, gravely.

"Yes, at first—but not latterly. I declare to you, not latterly."

"And you were capable of doing it? What did you have to tell him? I desire you to speak the truth!" There was an air of command and imposing dignity mingled with Mathilde's deep distress, which Ma'amselle Sophie could not withstand; she, therefore, related all that had taken place from the beginning to the end.

"And," continued her mistress, in a voice of suspense, "who is this Miss Hilda?"

"She is his cousin; she and her sister are staying with their aunt, Mrs. Wallenberg. Neither of the gentlemen have said a word here about their visit; but yesterday I met the rector driving with the young lady, and it was very easy to see what he was after."

"Have you any thing more to communicate to me?"

"Nothing more," answered Sophie, with innocent frankness.

"Then go, and leave me alone to myself."

"Alas! will you never forgive me, madame?"

"I shall try to do so—but we must part."

"That we should do at any rate," replied Sophie, pertly.

"But," she added, "it is nearly time for the rector to come."

"I am aware of it, and that is just the reason why I wish to be alone at present. I will ring in half an hour."

"When the door was fairly closed, the last trace of self-command disappeared from the beautiful countenance of her mistress. She wrung her white hands; but then, quick as lightning, a ray of joy flashed through the mist of despair, called forth, doubtless, by a happy thought, an idea, a hope—only instantly to be replaced again by anxiety, fear, and restless timidity.

"Who could have imagined it?—how mean!" she exclaimed. "Still what a blessing that the worst was merely a doubt—no, it was not even a doubt, else, instead of fainting, I should have died on the spot; but," she added, with returning composure, "I must look and see on what day he writes. Where has the letter gone to?"

She hastened to the chiffoniere, and took from a secret drawer a small book, which was filled with memoranda, through which she began eagerly to glance.

"July the—. Rather diverted by the absurd visit of two brothers.' Ah, I wish I had kept to my first resolution not to receive them—but who knows what a couple of idle fellows as they are, might not have ventured to have done!

"July—. Letters from both the brothers. An offer from the rector. Conceited blockhead! Mr. Victor Wallenberg's engagement—not so badly devised!—Ah! what is this? His journey to the town to fetch the letter." She smiled through the tears which still glistened in her eyes. "The letter—yes, that precious letter!—it was a mercy that he had sufficient delicacy not to deliver it himself!

"Three days later. Oh I need not read it over. Never shall I forget my agitation when I returned home. It was this which Sophie betrayed; if she had known more she would have betrayed more. My God, my God, how dearly I have paid for this hour of bliss, which passed so quickly!—and this hateful duplicity!—Ah, if I had loved my husband I could never have consented, by my silence, to this deception."

She turned over more leaves, and read in an under-tone:

"I almost scorn myself for having encouraged those two men to continue their unrewarded attentions, merely in order to guard my steps from spying eyes. But do they deserve any thing better at my hands? If they will persecute a poor woman, ought she not to defend herself?"

"Here I have it at last."

"August the 10th. The letter was sent to her. I have nothing to add, every thing is included in those words—"

but has she received that letter? Has she answered it? and how has she done so? There must be an end to all this. To-morrow, to-morrow, for the very last time! I would rather die than continue longer the life I am leading here. The clock is striking. Ah, my insinuating rector, we shall soon be quits with one another!"

She took a sheet of paper and wrote as follows:

"SIR:—It is very nearly six weeks since you did me the honor to offer me your hand, and I refused it; since that time, however, you have presented yourself to me in the light of a friend, and in this character you have been received without distrust.

"Pardon me if this can no longer continue. A confession which my waiting-maid made to me this morning, deprives me of the pleasure of seeing you in future.

"MATHILDE."

She rang. Not twenty minutes later Ma'amselle Sophie delivered the note with triumphant pride to the rector, who had come to pay his accustomed morning visit.

CHAPTER XX.

THE LEGAL QUESTION.

"How goes it? do you intend to hang yourself, or to drown yourself?" asked Victor, as he accidentally stumbled upon his brother while sauntering along by himself, on the evening of the same day. "You have not been visible the whole afternoon."

"To-morrow I shall be able to put the same question to you," replied the rector, angrily.

"Zounds!" exclaimed Victor, assuming an air of triumph. "I perceive that our bet is at an end, and that you won't need to take advantage of the condition attached to our agreement."

"What condition?"

"Have you not forgotten? Well, I will refresh your memory. If I do not succeed before I leave Elfheim in four or five days, I am to relinquish all pretensions, and you are to have the exclusive right to push your luck."

"That was merely an absurd joke. Two sensible persons would never consider such folly binding. I, for my part, do not feel in the least interested in this coquette; she amused me tolerably for a while, that was all. Hilda, on the contrary—"

"I am very glad to find that you are already trying to console yourself, but I strongly suspect, though, that some rebuff from her side has called forth this reaction in your feelings."

"It is all owing to Hilda's sweetness, her earnestness, and her straightforward character."

"Possibly—but you have just come from Tysselsvik, whither you went, of course, merely from habit. What happened there? Recollect, our agreement was perfect frankness toward each other."

"Well, look at that," and Edwin flung the note to Victor, who snatched it up. "Read it when I am gone, and promise me to never mention the subject again. I am as angry and provoked with myself as a man can be, and I abjure forever more anything approaching to frivolity. I will never look at another woman again, except the one I take for a wife."

"The deuce, what a salutary effect the note has had upon you—now good-by—I am as curious as a school-boy."

"I hope you will remember your promise. An honest man is as good as his word!"

"Oh, indeed, I did not know I had given any—but be it so—I may possibly require yours in return; to-morrow this love affair may be over for me, too."

They shook hands, and then parted.

Victor now being alone, began to peruse the note, and a most ludicrous grimace he made as he murmured some

words to the effect how happy he was that he was not in Edwin's shoes.

That evening, according to agreement, not a syllable was breathed of the unfortunate termination of the rector's matrimonial plans. The brothers were evidently not at their ease with each other, they were constrained in their manners, and a gloom spread itself over the whole party.

"This has been an extremely tedious evening," complained Bertha, in no very amiable mood, when the young lawyer was wishing her good-night. "May we be permitted to know what is the matter with both of you?"

"And have you yourself, my dear cousin, been as charming as usual?"

"Charming?" repeated Bertha. "Do you think I am going to waste my powers upon so worthless an object as an ill-tempered cavalier? oh, no, indeed, I don't intend to be so lavish. I shall reserve them for—"

"The bad temper of your future husband, I suppose?"

But Bertha had not waited to hear the end of the sentence; she had hastened away, her pretty lips curled by a pert smile.

* * * * *

It was again morning. Victor did not make his appearance at the breakfast-table; he had taken something alone, and had started off before the others had assembled. The clock in Mathilde's drawing-room had just struck eleven, when the young lawyer was announced.

The whole way to Tysselsvik he had been as courageous and stout-hearted as Hercules, but even Hercules was weak among women; it is less to be wondered at, therefore, that Victor felt so too.

There was only one means which would enable him to bear the triumph or the defeat of the day with honor, namely, if his vanity were excited. He was determined to be more courageous than all the heroes of past ages. But what had come over the beautiful widow. She arose, then resumed her seat; she blushed and turned pale by turns; she trembled and tried to speak, but could with difficulty steady her voice.

Victor's confidence arose first a little, then it took a large spring, and finally it made a gigantic stride.

"Madame, will you have the goodness to grant my request, and kindly listen to me?"

"Not to-day, Mr. Wallenberg—I will—I must—in a word, I will listen to you to-morrow as long as you please to speak!"

"Oh, that is too much, too much—dear Mathi * * * madame I meant to say—that is enough for me to live upon until then."

"But," continued Mathilde, "by-the-by, there is something I wish to know. Perhaps you may recollect that it was a legal question which—"

"For heaven's sake let us have no law matters now!"

"But this question is so easy," persisted the widow.

"For me your command is law!" replied Victor, who seemed to be more proud than happy.

"The question which I wished to put to you was this: If a man, engaged to be married, openly and constantly pays attention to another woman, which of the two ladies does he insult the most?"

"Oh, madame, that strictly belongs to the province of morals."

"Possibly; but still I expect your answer."

"Permit me to defer it till to-morrow. It shall be answered before I put the question which you have given me leave to ask. Meanwhile, I am convinced that you have guessed—that with your penetration you have understood all."

"Very probably, but do not make yourself too sure."

"Oh no. I shall say to myself, Hope is not always reality."

"And you can add, as an equally true saying, that reality is not always hope."

After these words, which were spoken with a peculiar

expression, the charming widow made a gesture, which signified more distinctly than words could do that the visit was at an end.

Victor scarcely *went* out, he was borne on wings, but on *what* wings he did not himself know, when he was again seated at home in his mother's drawing-room. He had merely an indistinct idea that he answered Edwin's inquiring glances with annihilating insolence. However, he had only uttered four words:

"Put off until to-morrow!"

"Well, I declare, you seem to be all in the clouds; are you dreaming of a dwelling in the sun?" asked Bertha, with unfeigned astonishment at the altered expression of her cousin's countenance.

"Yes, my dear cousin," answered Victor, in an undertone, as a slight sigh escaped unbidden. "Yes, I am rejoicing beforehand at my life in the sun. But that does not prevent me from regretting a certain star, near which I would have liked so much to have established myself."

At these words the first blush which Victor had been able to call forth, mantled Bertha's cheeks. But she did not answer.

The rector, who was standing near Hilda at the next window, while she was calmly plying her needle, whispered in her ear:

"Just glance at my brother, and see how he looks."

"Like a very bright peony, which appears to be saying to a tiny flowret—'Look at me, have I not cause to be contented with myself?'"

"Exactly so, but to-morrow, at this hour, any one who understands the language of flowers as well as you do, will hear the peony whisper: 'Do not gaze at me, a cold wind has damaged my beauty, and caused my leaves to droop!'"

The rector had expected a smile for his pretty phrase; but he merely received a thoughtful "Hem!"

"All women are ungraceful as long as they observe that people are seeking them," thought Edwin. "When one considers the matter, however, it is not to be wondered at. A time comes when it is the charming little wife's turn to show herself thankful for the slightest attention on the part of her husband, and if he occasionally pats her cheek affectionately, and says, 'How pretty you are to-day, my dear,' she scarcely knows whether she is in heaven or on earth—happy time—marriage is truly paradise in miniature."

Bertha's thoughts at that moment were: "Can my worthy cousin have taken refuge in astronomy on purpose? There is a boldness, and at the same time a longing in his tone; my curiosity is raised; the Lord be thanked, however, that is all!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LAST SCENE.

AN evening as sultry and misty as the one on which our tale began, had followed this day.

Edwin had proposed a fishing party, and the young ladies had agreed; but Victor, who had rocked himself into a world of bliss and triumph, had determined to employ the evening his own way.

Perhaps he counted upon being pressed to accompany them. But Bertha did not even make the slightest attempt to do so: he was obliged to remain at home, and endeavor to fathom the great secret: in what consists happiness? It seemed so near him now, that he—according to his opinion—had only to stretch out his hand to grasp it. Why, then, this half-sigh, this silly inquiry which of the two young women would make him the happiest? Bah! Philosophy bored him; he would have nothing to do with it.

"How lost in thought you are to-day, my son," said his affectionate mother; "will not Bertha listen to you? she is a most engaging girl."

"Dear mother, do you recollect that we once spoke of another?" said Victor, without answering his mother's question.

"Yes, certainly, but I have since perceived that it will not repay either of you to take any trouble in that quarter; besides, neither of you were really in love."

"It is not that—wait until to-morrow, and you will see. I had not intended to have confided it to any one, but I may tell you, mother, that you will have a charming daughter-in-law."

"My dear Victor, I fear you permit your vain—"

"It is too bad, you are always repeating that. I only demand twenty-four hours to prove that I am born to be the victim of unjust suspicion."

"My dear boy, be that as it may, I must inform you that this lady's secret doings do not meet with my approbation. An honest grief does not require the kind of diversion which she seeks."

"We forced ourselves upon her, dear mother, she had nothing to do with it."

"You may have done so in the first instance, I grant you, but afterwards she permitted you to continue your visits; and if this diversion were enough, what does she do then during her solitary rows in the evening? I have no confidence in such proceedings."

"What can be more innocent than rowing?" pleaded Victor.

"Hem, hem," the old lady began, but Victor would hear no more; off he started to his favorite retreat under the cliffs, and he could not have come more opportunely to see the boat, containing the mistress of his soul, gliding over the blue, mirror-like waters.

The young man was now tempted, most powerfully tempted. Why should he not step into his boat, and follow her? A voice—the voice of delicacy, raised itself against this proceeding. Did he not detest spying with all his heart? had he not condemned his brother for having made use of this system? Of course he had, but— but as his own future wife was in question, what would be more natural, more just, and more proper, than he should yield to his desire?

And he did yield.

Ten minutes later, he was sitting in his boat, now perfectly tranquil and contented, for he had succeeded in persuading himself that what he was doing was merely in order to calm his mother's fears.

* * * * *

The small island upon which the last scenes were enacted is formed, as it were, of a labyrinth of groves; all was smiling, pastoral, and enchanting.

One could land at many points, and this evening there were no less than four strange boats, which had sought a harbor along the hospitable and inviting white beach. The boats were moored at such a distance from each other that the parties who had come in them could not see who landed from each. We already know to whom two of them belonged; the lovely and romantic situation of this pearl of an island had induced the little fishing party from Elfheim to land there for an hour. The ladies had commanded, and the rector had obeyed, still it must be owned that he had done so unwillingly, for he had accustomed himself to consider this island as sacred; however, the wish of his new flame conquered.

There was yet a fourth boat unaccounted for; we shall see if we can not find an owner for it also.

* * * * *

"Do you like this spot, my dear cousin Hilda?"

"Oh, very much indeed; I shall be glad to sit here awhile," replied Hilda.

"The ground is damp from the dew," observed Edwin, spreading out his cloak, upon which Hilda seated herself without ceremony.

"Have your brought Moore with you?"

"Of course I have; will you permit me to read aloud to you?"

"With pleasure," and the young lady took her embroidery from a small case, and after having cast a long, earnest glance upon the sweet surrounding scenery, and after having inhaled, in a deep breath, the fresh, fragrant air, Hilda began to work, and Edwin to read.

"It just seems as if I were not here," cried Bertha, smiling, "and to punish you I shall bid you both farewell, and shall set off and reconnoiter the place on my own account," and she hastened up the hill, as she thought to herself:

"What a girl Hilda is; did ever any one see such a patient martyr? I am sure she suffers terribly! Yet she is as calm and quiet as ever, and she never ceases to work. If anybody had behaved so to me—even as it is, I cannot compose myself to embroidery, for—for there is so much folly in the world!"

On the other side of the hill Victor came sauntering along—also absorbed in thought, of course.

"How distrustful women are, mothers in particular! My poor, dear mother, how embarrassed she will be at first, then afterward how rejoiced! It is but right that I should do away with her fears, for who loves us so well as a mother does? No one, and, taking all in all, whom do we love with the same affection as we love her, to whom we are everything?"

"I should like to know which of the two is best calculated to make the most excellent mother—Mathilde or Bertha—well, that is not the point in question yet—I should like to know, though, which of the two would be the best wife?"

"But where can she be, my mysterious fair one? I dare not call—the deuce—do I hear or do I not hear two voices—no, my ears deceive me—it does sound, though, as if two persons were speaking—what an absurd idea!" He stood irresolute. "This is no freak of my imagination, that is clear. It is decidedly Mathilde's voice and that of another." He went forward a few steps, gliding as softly as an Indian. Suddenly he stopped again, confused, dismayed, aghast! Is his vision imperfect, or is reality before him? He seized his eye-glass, for there is deception in every thing. His bet can not terminate in this manner; oh, no, no.

What is it that he sees, while he himself is not visible? He perceives Mathilde—the adorable young widow, whom he never for a moment doubted would accept him on the following day—but he does not only behold her—no, far from it! Before her a young man is kneeling, and from her lips seemed to flow words of fond affection; she is consoling, imploring, and encouraging him, while he, Victor, who had wasted six weeks in this conquest, is now—his eyes must deceive him; *coute qui coute* he will have the witness of his ears.

And this witness ran thus:

"Beloved Richard, this struggle is beyond my strength; you must no longer lead me into temptation—indeed you ought to leave this neighborhood at once. My feelings—yes, even my conscience, speaks loudly against these meetings; and, besides, it pains me to keep up this farce any longer with that honest-hearted blockhead, the lawyer. As to the rector, I found an excuse yesterday to rid myself of him; and to-morrow it is my other lover's turn—for now that you are going to leave—"

"Mathilde, you are cruel! Have we had so much happiness in life that we may not enjoy this paltry pleasure for a few seconds, without pangs of conscience?"

"Hush, are your feelings calm?"

The lover bowed his head in his hands.

"Do you not see that I am right?"

"Permit me, at least, to stay until I have received her answer," he said, in a low, faltering voice. "If it con-

tains death, there will yet remain to us the last interview, when we shall take leave of each other forever."

"But, let me tell you, that *she* is here!"

"She—who?—what do you mean?" he exclaimed, springing up.

"Ah, your agitation proves that we are not acting rightly. It is not sufficient that our love is as pure as heaven—it still is wrong. Alas, Richard, why did you persuade me, why? I have suffered terribly on her account, on your account, on my own account, and on account of my husband, who is no more, for it is not proper to deceive the world in the way I have been doing."

Richard had not heard a word Mathilde had been saying; as one in a dream, he kept repeating:

"*She here? she!*"

"Yes, on a visit to her aunt, You surely must now perceive that an end ought to be put to this affair."

"Mathilde, I have told you, and I swear it once more, if she still wishes to unite herself to me, the dream of this week shall be the last of my life—remember she fancies that you are yet bound."

"I do not forget it—but do go, I beseech you, Richard, go!"

"Grant me a few minutes longer. Let me hear the sound of your dear voice again!"

"Ah, Richard, I never have a moment's peace, and for years I have had none, except when I received your letter telling me that you were coming to this neighborhood, and in which you fixed the first time that we should meet in this dear, sacred spot. Ah, that letter! that dear, precious letter! I never shall forget its contents! Do you recollect, when we ventured to hope again, how, in the first intoxication of bliss, we laughed over my messenger, the bridegroom? I am very curious to know if his intended, Bertha, is aware that he has worn her ring for two years. I can't imagine—"

At that moment Victor rushed forward; neither he, nor the two who were taking leave of each other, had remarked that for some minutes past a new witness had been watching the above scene. This new witness was none other than Bertha herself.

The young widow and her companion became greatly embarrassed on Victor so suddenly making his appearance. All three endeavored to speak; Victor, however, was the first to find words.

"Madame!" he said, with very dignified seriousness, "I do not think I have a right to reproach you in the slightest degree. We have mutually served each other's interests. On one occasion I was your messenger, and latterly, if you please, your plaything. *You* served me in another way. My talked-of engagement was not a fiction invented to gain an interest in your eyes, and to calm your fears; I am really betrothed to my cousin, I love her with all my heart, but she does not love me in the way I wish to be loved; I therefore thought it as well to set on foot a little intrigue. Jealousy has always spurred on love—and I can assert, without boasting, that my experiment has been of service; if she were here, she would admit it herself."

"I voluntarily admit it, and the best proof is, that I have followed you hither to see what you were about."

At these words Victor turned quickly around, and to his astonishment he beheld before him his charming cousin, her face radiant with roguish smiles.

To hasten to her, seize her hand, and whisper his ardent thanks, was the work of a second, adding in still lower tones:

"Remember, most charming of all charming women, that you once said, 'If I am not engaged without my own consent, I shall never be so.' Fate has taken you at your word."

"Hush, hush, we will settle that by-and-by; let me now say a word to Richard."

"No judgment without defense, Bertha!" eagerly exclaimed the former brother-in-law to be. "Your sister

knows all, except that Mathilde has been a widow for the last nine months, and that we are about to take leave of each other!"

"Miss—" stammered Mathilde, greatly embarrassed. "I was engaged to Richard several years before I was married; and, with the exception of three interviews here, to which the angels might have been witness, I have nothing to reproach myself with in regard to your sister."

"I am convinced of it," replied Bertha, "and I am aware as well as Hilda that you never sent back the family relic to your former intended, that as long as you retained it, the pledge of faithfulness should be—"

"By heavens, I perceive that Hilda has read my letter, and shown it to you; but I have not yet received her answer. The magnanimous girl evidently casts me off; can it be true?"

"It is; she does so, however, calmly, after reflection, like every thing that she has done throughout her life; but I must give you a piece of advice," here she gave Victor a private wink. "And I beg, for the sake of our former friendship, that you will not reject it; leave this neighborhood immediately; quit this treacherous little island instantly."

"And for a year, counting from the present day," said Mathilde, seriously, but with great affection in her voice, "we shall not see each other again. Farewell, Richard; your mother's gift, the image of your heart, remains till then, as formerly, my consolation."

She hastened away as light as a bird, without glancing at any one except Bertha, whose heart she had already entirely won.

* * * * *

It was about half an hour later that Victor and his cousin, after having explained one or two little matters which were necessary, rejoined their party.

The rector was still reading aloud in his most touching tones the "Veiled Prophet," and Hilda's veiled eyes rested thoughtfully upon the reader.

"What a mercy it is, sweet Bertha," whispered Victor, "that you are gifted with so much presence of mind! Hilda has to thank you for having escaped a great deal of pain."

"Just as you have to thank me for having escaped a great defeat," she replied, with a look of intelligent warning.

"In gratitude for your kindness, I will devote the remainder of my life to you. Say, dearest girl, will you promise me in future to help my mother to correct my many faults?"

"We will see. As soon as I get my thirty thousand rix-dollars in my possession, I promise you that you shall receive my answer!"

THE END.

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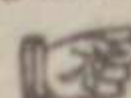
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